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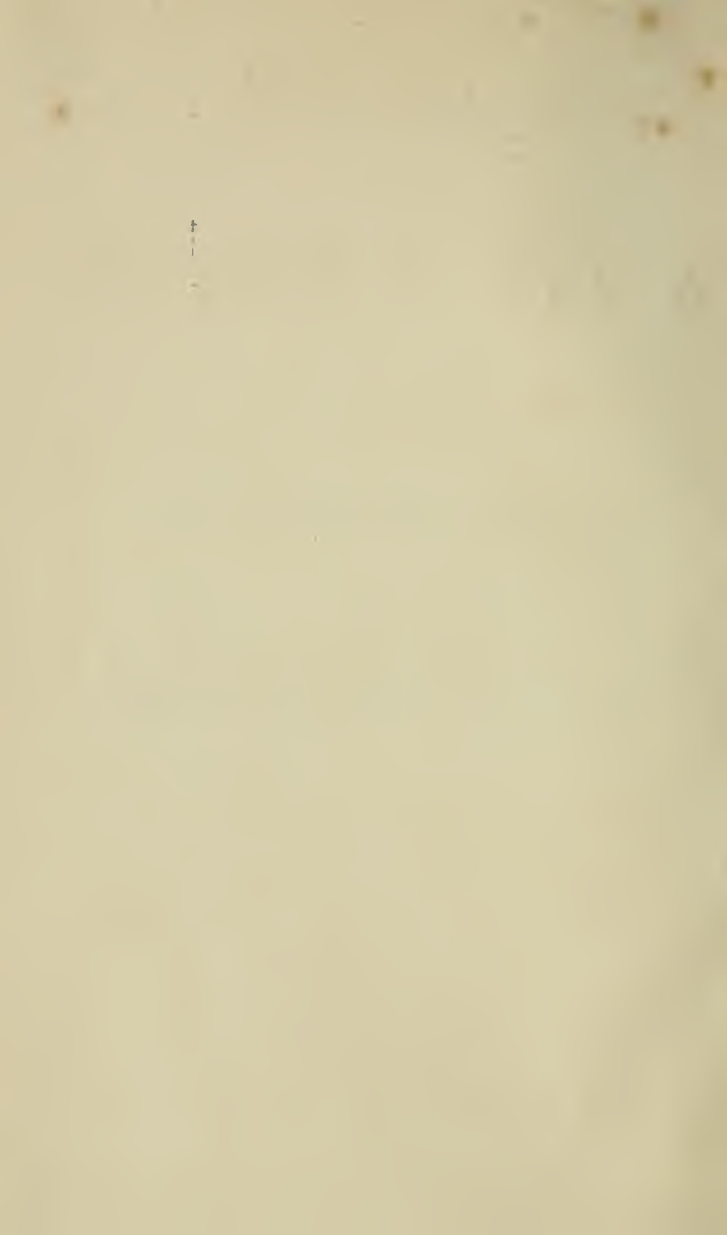
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THE AMUSEMENTS

OF

A MAN OF FASHION.



THE AMUSEMENTS

OF

A MAN OF FASHION.

A Nobel.

BY

NORMAN NUGENT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, 8, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1873.

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LONDO

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THE AMUSEMENTS OF A MAN OF FASHION.

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN LENHAM'S CURIOSITY.



E must now pass over a period of three months.

During that interval the advertisement to Edith M—— appeared again and again. It had been seen, and freely commented on by members of all classes, rich and poor; yet, strange to say, had never met the eye of the one for whom it was intended. True, when anything remarkable transpired,

a royal marriage, or a great man's death, Miss Moorfield took in the *Times* for an hour a day: and the first six weeks after her departure from Oxenten did so regularly; looking with a feverish anxiety for some account of a marriage which, though not royal, to her was of infinitely greater interest. But as regards the advertisement sheet, her curiosity went no farther; and she at length endeavoured to persuade herself that the bridal notice had appeared in some less important journal.

The possibility of Sir Frederick's engagement being broken off never once occurred to her; it had been arranged to take place at Christmas, and of course it was long since over. Poor Edith, she had ceased to blame him for what she now chose to consider as entirely her own doing: striving to gain strength in the consciousness of a large self-sacrifice. Why should she mur-

mur? No doubt it was ordered for the best. We are taught to believe that all the sufferings we endure here are thus ordered; yet that does not change the fact of their existence. It is far more difficult to feel resigned to what we know to be right, than to do right for the right's sake—and Edith proved it by experience.

She never ventured to return to the studio in Regent Street. An undefined dread of those whom she might happen to meet there had constantly deterred her. Visions of Sir Frederick and his beautiful bride—radiant in happiness (was *he* happy too?), surrounded by admiring friends, and all the appendages of wealth—came before her with a cruel distinctness. She pictured herself standing there alone, in presence of that brilliant assembly, selling her drawings; recognising *him* with a start of terror—shrinking in shame and confusion from the

glance of *his wife*! No, she would not run the risk. Her pride should at least save her from needless humiliation.

Some time after Christmas, Jane Wilmot became seriously ill, and was obliged to hire a woman to take her place in the shop. This was, on the whole, rather fortunate for Edith, as it compelled her to exert herself, and prevented her giving way to depression. Notwithstanding the old servant's remonstrances and dismay at seeing her "young lady" so employed, Edith nursed her with the persevering tenderness of a child, and had at last the pleasure of knowing that she was well enough to resume her former occupation. The doctor's bill was heavy, and after paying all expenses, Miss Moorfield found that she had only two sovereigns left. Something must be done, and at once. Strange to say, the fatigue she had undergone seemed to

have renewed her strength and given her fresh energy; and now that her duties in the sick-room were at an end, she felt more than ever the necessity of earning money.

Full of this thought, one bright morning towards the close of March she took an omnibus to the West End, and walked down the Edgware Road, where Mrs. Wilmot told her she would find a substantial picture-shop. The master of the establishment, a grave, studious-looking man of fifty, appeared to be much struck by Edith's drawings. After some consideration he turned to her with the remark—

“You draw very well indeed. Those landscapes are exceedingly pretty; but I have little sale for such things. Now, if you would not mind——”

“I should not mind any honest work to gain a livelihood,” rejoined Edith, frankly.

“ Well, then, I have two daughters, both of whom are very fond of the pencil. Their mother and I do not wish them to be taught by a man. I like your style, and—in short, I think you will do them justice. Suppose you give them lessons for two hours twice a week? I will pay you at the rate of five shillings an hour. Their mother would be present, but I daresay you would not object to that?”

Slightly amused at the good man's precautions to prevent his daughters being in any way contaminated, Edith gladly embraced the proposal, and left the shop with a heart much lighter than when she entered it.

One of those sudden changes of weather so common in the spring, had in the meantime caused the sky to become dark and lowering. As she reached the corner of the Edgware Road, just opposite the Marble Arch, the

clouds broke in a heavy shower. Without any protection from its violence (she had forgotten to bring her sunshade), Edith stood, rather disconsolately, looking out for an omnibus. Several passed her, but they were all full. Just then she became the object of attention to a gentleman, who had taken partial shelter under the porch of a house. It was Captain Lenham.

“What an elegant woman,” he thought; “she will get wet through though if she stands there much longer. I shall lend her my umbrella.”

At that moment Edith threw back her veil, in order to see more clearly through the driving rain. Lenham started, but instantly recovering himself, lifted his hat with ready self-possession.

“Will you allow me to offer you this umbrella?”

An honest face is its own introduction.

Won by his manner and grateful for the loan, as she rather dreaded taking cold, Edith did not hesitate to accept his proffered kindness.

“ Shall I get you a cab ? ”

Without waiting an answer, he signalled a close fly, went up to the fair unknown, handed her in, and hurried off to his own private Hansom, which at that moment appeared at the corner.

The two vehicles started in a line, about twenty paces from each other. The high-mettled thorough-bred with difficulty held in to a slow trot, so as to keep pace with the worn out London hack that plodded wearily before him. Lenham was determined to see this adventure to an end. As the hired cab drew up before the little shop, he told his servant to stop.

There was a loaded cart between, but, by leaning on one side, he could just catch a

glimpse of Edith, as she stood on the pavement paying the cabman. The sight of his umbrella in her hand made him suddenly aware that she had forgotten to return it. The next moment she entered the house, and Lenham, driving slowly past, eagerly read off the heading:—

“ WILMOT,

“ Berlin Wool Repository.”

This, then, was the residence of the artiste; so evidently a lady, yet reduced to labour for a living. Who was she, and what possible connexion could there be between one in her friendless position and the rich and generous Sir Frederick? Lenham thought over the enigma again and again, until his head ached in the fruitless endeavour to solve it. The temporary loss of his umbrella struck him as being a most fortunate coincidence. She would, of course, return it, probably with a

note of explanation; and that might give him a clue.

Though devotedly attached to his friend Morton, for whom he had the highest esteem as well as the greatest affection, he could not help fearing that the consciousness of some apparently irretrievable error was weighing down his spirits, and gradually undermining his health. There was a mystery, he was sure, and his ardent friendship panted to have it satisfactorily cleared. Although rejoiced beyond measure at the sudden and hitherto unexplained breaking off of the engagement with Miss Hayes, he was by no means easy. Sir Frederick seemed to be losing all interest in life, and was certainly looking exceedingly unwell. Instead of the even cheerfulness which, joined to his many noble qualities, had made him so generally beloved, he now gave way to alternate fits of the deepest

melancholy or the wildest excitement. Lenham felt convinced that he was on the right track, although he might have found it difficult to explain the object of his endeavours.

We must now return to Edith, who was seriously discomposed at having inadvertently carried off what did not belong to her. It vexed her so much that she was scarcely able to respond to the congratulations of her humble friend, on the regular and remunerative employment which had been, so to speak, providentially thrown into her lap. When getting into the cab she had closed the umbrella, and forgotten all about it until half-way on her journey homewards, when she was greatly dismayed to find it in her possession. She did not immediately perceive the small Italian engraving round the handle; and the apparent impossibility of returning it to the owner provoked and distressed her. It was not until she entered

the little sitting-room, and in the darkness of a yellow London rain was obliged to light a candle before she could find the necessary change of dress, that the flickering flame falling on the polished silver revealed a name and address—

“CAPTAIN LENHAM,

“7, Cadogan Place, S.W.”

Edith started violently, and in her agitation nearly let the candlestick fall. Captain Lenham! Where and when had she heard that name? Yes, it must be so. Captain Lenham, the intimate friend of Sir Frederick.

And she thought that she had learnt to look so calmly on the past! Ah! we do not forget, even when most we seem to have forgotten. A written word, a glance, a gesture: a broken link, a flower, a song—aught, anything that speaks to us of those who *have been* all that we would fain delude

ourselves into believing they *are not now*, will drag out the long hidden coil of memory, and laugh us to scorn!

“CAPTAIN LENHAM,

“7, Cadogan Place, S.W.”

(We may as well inform our readers that he had sold his commission some months previously.)

What was to be done now?

Edith reflected a moment, and then called to Mrs. Wilmot—

“Jane, I have been careless enough to bring home an umbrella that does not belong to me. Luckily the address is on the handle. I cannot think of letting you go out in the rain; but if it is fine to-morrow, would you mind taking it back for me? You can have a cab the whole way.”

“Certainly, dear Miss Edie; but there is no need for you to go to that expense. I

shall do very well in an omnibus. You have spent so much money on me already. I am quite ashamed. You are too good to me. I shall never be able to repay you a hundredth part of your kindness. I daresay I could manage to walk, if it is not very far. Anyhow, an omnibus will do."

"I should not think of such a thing. It would be madness. You are not yet strong enough to be rushing about in an omnibus. No, you must have a cab. Besides," she added, smiling, "recollect we shall be quite rich now."

"Bless your dear heart! working for me too."

"And why not, Jane? Did you not take me in when I had no other friend to go to? But about this foolish blunder of mine. I will write a line and explain, and then you can leave both the note and umbrella at the door."

The next morning, at ten o'clock, Mrs. Wilmot set out on her errand.

Rather gratified to find herself in an aristocratic locality, the old lady got out of the cab the moment it stopped, and rang the bell before the man could assist her. While she was delivering the note and umbrella to the servant, with strict injunctions respecting their speedy transmission, Captain Lenham came into the hall, and, catching sight of his lost property, called out eagerly—

“Stop. Pray come in for a moment. I want to speak to you.”

Mrs. Wilmot made a low courtesy.

“The note will explain it, sir. My young lady is very sorry.”

“All right. It does not signify in the least; I am too happy to have been of any use. Do come in. I will not detain you. Just tell the man to wait, Wilson.”

Thus urged, Mrs. Wilmot crossed the threshold, half afraid that Edith might not approve of her complying with his request, yet curious to know what the gentleman wanted to say to her.

Lenham led the way to a room on the ground floor, which presented all the picturesque confusion of a bachelor abode. Placing a chair for Jane Wilmot, he hastily broke the seal of his letter. It was very short; only two lines and the date.

“Captain Lenham will kindly pardon an involuntary error. Many thanks.”

“Pray give my compliments to Miss Field.” He laid an emphasis on the name. “Pray give my compliments to Miss Field, and assure her I am only too happy to have had the opportunity of rendering her so small a service.”

“Miss Field,” thought the old woman.

“I wonder how he got hold of that? I’m not going to tell him the other half of the word; though, for the matter of right, *she* has no cause to be ashamed of it, poor lamb.”

Greatly puzzled as to what he should say next, and full of one thought, which he did not exactly know how to express, Lenham rang the bell for wine and biscuits. The fresh air had given Mrs. Wilmot an appetite; she was, moreover, secretly pleased at the interest her young lady had excited, and very willingly accepted the proffered hospitality.

For some minutes her entertainer leant against the chimney-piece in silent abstraction; and then, looking her straight in the face, suddenly observed—

“It is fortunate you came to-day. Pray help yourself to the biscuits. I’m glad I was not out. I might have been away

from home. I have been thinking of paying a visit to my friend, Sir Frederick Morton, of Donnington."

His glance met hers. For a moment she appeared uneasy, and the glass rattled as she placed it on the table. Evidently the name was known. There was something in it, yet he was no nearer the solution.

"Very fortunate, sir, that I brought the umbrella in time. This April weather you will be certain to want it," returned Jane Wilmot, with provoking coolness. "Thank you kindly, sir. I wish you a good morning."

"What next?" thought Lenham, biting his lip with vexation at the difficulty of the problem that he wanted to solve. "I cannot go and tell Morton all about it. He might think I deserved a thrashing for impertinent interference in an illicit love

affair. No, by heaven! I'd stake my life that girl is innocent! I wonder if she has merely seen him somewhere, and fallen desperately in love without knowing him? Such things have been. But then the name? Well, I seem to have gone the length of my tether, and must now wait for some romantic chance to unravel the mystery. What can that old woman have to do with it? I believe she was laughing at me all the time. Perhaps she is Miss Field's confidante, as close as wax, I'll warrant. Possibly this note may be of use. The handwriting is pretty and ladylike."

He looked at it again, then folded it carefully, and placed it in his pocket-book.



CHAPTER II.

THE COUNTESS DE ST. POL.



HE afternoon of the same day a party of Englishmen were lounging on the pier-head of a quiet seaport in the south of France. There the atmosphere was clear and cloudless; the blue waters of the Mediterranean looked like the expanse of a mighty lake; while here and there a white sail studded the horizon, and a few groups of fishermen crooned idly over the shingly beach, against which the small waves beat with murmuring, melodious monotony.

“There’s style for you! Did you ever see a more beautiful profile?”

The gentleman addressed turned round, but was too late. A tall, distinguished-looking couple were walking a little distance farther on. She, magnificently dressed; he, rather past the prime of life, but still handsome, with noble features, and that *je ne sais quoi* which always conveys the impression of a military education.

Sir Desborough Denton started as the lady bent slightly on one side to look over the pier wall.

“Who are they, More?” he inquired of a retired captain then residing in the town. “Do you know them?”

“Yes—no—that is to say, not personally. The Count and Countess de St. Pol, recently returned from their honeymoon. They have a large château in the neighbourhood. He is the son of a millionaire, and one of the richest propriétaires in France; a good fellow in the

main; rather proud and touchy—so they say—but spends his money like a prince.”

“And she?”

“Was a great English heiress. The Count met her at Paris, fell in love with her on the spot, and married her after a courtship of six weeks. Yet it is said they do not live happily. She is an exquisite creature, looks barely twenty; while he is old enough to be her father.”

“Do you recollect her maiden name?”

“Let me see. She excited quite a *fureur* in the London world. Yes, now I remember. Hayes. Miss Marion Hayes. Marion la belle. You must have heard of her before.”

“Heard of her! I should rather think I had. Why, she is a very old friend of mine! I must go and renew the acquaintance.”

“Better take care, Denton,” laughed

another of the party. "The Count is no kitten."

Sir Desborough smiled scornfully. It must not be imagined that his ignorance of Marion's marriage had suggested inquiry. He knew perfectly when she was married, and also to whom. It was merely a stroke of policy on his part to obtain as much information as possible before resuming the intercourse. The only point on which he had been previously uninformed was the fact that she and her husband were residing in the vicinity of the very town which he had chosen for a fortnight's sojourn. The fortnight might stretch into months, now that there was something to make the time pass pleasantly. He had been getting awfully bored. Here was an excitement.

As husband and wife, still some distance apart, came back to take another turn, he

left his companions, and, bowing gracefully to the astonished Count, claimed the privilege of an old acquaintance.

“ I trust I may venture to address, as Countess de St. Pol, the lady I had the honour of knowing as Miss Hayes.”

Marion certainly possessed the art of self-command, or perhaps we ought to say dissimulation, in the highest degree. Yet she was nearly thrown off her guard by this unexpected rencontre. The momentary emotion which blanched her cheek was, however, only seen by Sir Desborough himself. Before her husband's eye rested on her countenance she had regained her wonted composure, and went through the ceremony of introduction with the most graceful nonchalance.

Sir Desborough Denton was a clever diplomatist. During a half hour's stroll on

that quiet pier he succeeded in making himself so agreeable to Monsieur de St. Pol, that the Count, charmed with the acquisition of such an entertaining companion, asked him to dine at the château on the following day ; an invitation feebly echoed by the Countess, who once or twice, as though wearied by a conversation in which she took no part, begged her husband to see if the carriage had arrived. She felt tired, and wanted to go home.

In compliance with her wishes, the two gentlemen crossed the quay, where, just off the breastwork, stood an open phaeton, drawn by a pair of beautiful chestnuts.

Having placed his wife in the carriage, Monsieur de St. Pol shook hands warmly with the Baronet, repeating his invitation for the morrow ; then, snatching the reins from his servant, sprang in hastily, only

waiting a moment to give Sir Desborough an opportunity of saying good-bye to the Countess.

Notwithstanding his assumed indifference, there was something in the iron grasp of the hand that closed over hers that thrilled Marion's heart with the undefined sinking which always accompanies the consciousness of being wholly and unreservedly in the power of another. Even love in purity is not ignorant of this weakness; only then it takes the form of clinging and confiding tenderness. Widely different is the perilous knowledge of sin.

As they drove off, the Count somewhat reproachfully addressed his wife.

"You never seem particularly pleased with anything I do, Marion."

"Nonsense, Alphonse. I do not even know to what you allude."

"Why, just now, this Sir Desborough,

you scarcely spoke to him. He must have thought you did not wish him to dine with us to-morrow. I think he is a charming person. Your friend too."

"Oh, is that all? Well, then, I will endeavour to repair my fault. I promise you in future you shall have no occasion to complain of my rudeness, either to him or to others," rejoined Marion, with a secret bitterness, conscious that in her forced self-restraint she had gone a little too far, and aware that the Count's peculiar temperament might lead him to remark coldness almost as much as undue familiarity.

Anxious, as far as possible, to repair her inadvertence, she exerted herself so successfully, that the cloud on the Count's brow rapidly cleared; and for a brief, treacherous season all was seeming harmony.



CHAPTER III.

MARGARET NICHOLSON'S VISIT TO THE CEMETERY OF ST. PIERRE.

SIX weeks after the events described in the preceding chapter, a one-horse “vigilante” drew up by the roadside, on the highway to N——, about six miles from the residence of Monsieur de St. Pol. The driver got down, and civilly touching his cap endeavoured to make himself understood in very bad English, of which we will spare our readers the repetition, and content ourselves with giving the meaning he intended to convey—viz., that the poor animal was completely worn

out, and that it was utterly impossible to proceed any farther without a few hours' rest.

"Is there any inn near?" asked the person whom he addressed as "madame," putting out her head, with evident dissatisfaction at the necessity of delay.

"Yes, madame, a little distance to the right."

"I see; among the trees What place is it?"

"The hameau de St. Pierre, madame, and yonder is the cimetière."

"Very well. You may drive round, put up the horse, and get something to eat."

This intimation was received with another low bow, and the emphatic assurance, "madame is good."

"Madame" was a harsh-looking, hard-featured woman of sixty or thereabouts,

dressed in deep mourning. We have seen her before; but time presses, and for the present interest of our narrative, it is necessary to describe her actions rather than her appearance.

Most of the inns in France, at any rate those frequented by English tourists, have in them some person or persons who can speak the language of our cosmopolite nation, and the pretty little auberge of St. Pierre was no exception to the general rule. The landlady's mother, a hale, kindly old woman, whose soft shining hair matched the whiteness of her cap, gladly undertook the office of interpreter and cicerone to the stranger, and after "madame" had partaken of some slight refreshment, the two started together for a walk round the neighbourhood.

Their way led past the cemetery. The Englishwoman stopped at the gate, and

asked her companion if visitors were allowed to go through.

“Certainly, if madame wishes it.”

This resting-place of the dead, romantically situated on the side of a hill, bore that pleasing, orderly appearance which in Continental burial-grounds forms so strong a contrast to many of our ill-appointed and ill-kept churchyards. Flower-beds, evergreens, and wreaths of immortelles softened the chilling aspect of the cold white headstones, on which the sign of our redemption was cut in a hundred different devices, and brightened the darker outline of a multitude of wooden crosses scattered at intervals throughout the enclosure—less costly, less aspiring, but not less dear to the survivors. The most humble had a wreath, an evergreen, or a bouquet of freshly-gathered flowers. No, not all. Far back, close to the boundary wall, stood, undecorated, a

large black cross, on which a name had been rudely cut, now partially effaced by the lapse of years. The mound itself looked peculiarly desolate in contrast with the well-kept graves around. Sheltered alike from sun and wind by the overhanging branches of an aged tree, the long grass had been suffered to grow into an indistinguishable mass. Its neglected appearance attracted the stranger's attention.

“What grave is that? Is it very old?”

“Oh no, madame. This cemetery has not been in existence more than nineteen years; and it was not the first interment even then. Will you come and look at it? There is a story madame might like to hear.”

Yes, madame would be glad. So they walked up together, under the shade of the old tree, close to the sorrowful-looking cross.

Some words had been originally painted in grooves, but they were now indistinct, all except the first four letters of a name—

“M A R G. . .”

There was something tragic in the Englishwoman's manner as she pointed to the inscription with a gesture of inquiry.

“Marguerite. Pray for the soul of poor Marguerite.”

“And why has this grave no flowers? Why is it not taken care of like the others?”

“Ah! she had no friends; she was alone, la pauvre Marguerite. The story will tell. Madame would like to hear the story.”

And as they turned into the high road the old lady began to relate it.

“More than twenty years ago, or perhaps it may be just on twenty years—for my

memory is not as good as it was then—there came to this village a very beautiful girl. I thought her young, though the maidens in these parts did say she must be nearly thirty. Nobody knew the truth, and nobody had a chance to inquire ; and if they had maybe they wouldn't have heard ; for, rich or poor, ugly or pretty, no woman likes telling her age. But I had better go back to the beginning. You see yonder white cottage on the brow of the hill ? Well, an agent came over from N——, that is the nearest town on the coast, to hire a small house for a lady and gentleman ; and he fixed on the white cottage as being the best in the neighbourhood. It was taken for three years, and, as we learned afterwards, fitted up with every comfort and luxury. The furniture was all in, and arranged one day, as the lady and gentleman were expected the next. I remember

it well. My daughter and I had been out for a walk. On our return we saw a carriage slowly ascending the hill, and we determined to wait behind the trees and watch. There was then a cross road at the corner yonder, with a cluster of tall bushes on one side ; so that Lisette and I managed to see all without being seen. The gentleman got out first, and then lifted a beautiful young creature in his arms. She was ill—fainting, I thought. I shall never forget her. She was pale as death, with long lashes falling on her cheek, and thick masses of brown hair pushed back from her white forehead, just for all the world like a picture. He seemed wonderfully tender of her, and yet there was something of fierce exultation in his manner, which struck me with a presentiment that all was not right. I can see them now, her head lying on his breast. She could not have been more than twenty-

three then ; though in the space of thirteen months she looked ten years older. I remember at the time thinking it strange that she was not dressed for travelling. The postboy said they had been on the road since midnight ; but either he knew no more, or had been bribed to secrecy. Monsieur Lefèvre (I knew by the name there must be something wrong, as the agent said he was an English milord, and Lefèvre is not English). Well, Monsieur Lefèvre, as he called himself, was a tall, powerfully-made man, about five-and-thirty, —to my thinking repulsive-looking, rather than handsome, with a scar on the right cheek, which appeared at some time or other to have been cut open, and then sewn up.”

“Ha !” exclaimed the Englishwoman, with a start, which, however, escaped her companion’s notice.

“ There was a great difference of opinion about his looks ; some declared he was ugly, and others the reverse. To my mind, when a man has coarse features, and not a bit of hair on his face, it is not very difficult to decide on the fact of his ugliness ; especially when he has small eyes—small suspicious, evil eyes.”

“ Never mind his looks. Go on.”

“ Ah ! madame is interested ; I thought she would be. They brought no servants with them. The cottage had been left in order by the agent, and a girl and a man from our auberge went up to wait on them that evening. The next day they hired an elderly person from the hameau—a Madame Lemaire—who, with occasional help, undertook to do the cooking and wait on the lady.”

“ Was she a lady ?”

“ That I cannot tell. She looked like

one; but it is a point always difficult to decide."

"True."

"Monsieur Lefèvre remained nearly a week, and then went away, returning at intervals. There was a great deal of curiosity excited, but without any chance of its being gratified. Madame Lemaire had evidently got into a good thing, and was far too wise to risk the loss of it by giving her tongue undue licence. It was useless to ask her any questions; when appealed to, her invariable answer was, 'I have had my orders, and I know my place.' Eleven months passed, and the wonderment had gradually subsided, when some children, who were gathering wild flowers near the fence of the cottage garden, heard the cry of an infant. This was the first intimation we received of the little stranger's arrival."

“ A girl or a boy ? ”

“ A girl. What followed was a mystery to us all. It seems that one day Monsieur Lefèvre took the child away with him, not to return. Whatever may have passed between him and his unfortunate victim, it is certain that she was a consenting party to this scheme. Madame Lemaire told me afterwards she had never been so cheerful, declaring that in a few days all would be well, and she should be the happiest woman in the world. Alas, for her trust in a bad man's honour ! He had evidently promised her something—most likely to make her his wife ; though why she allowed him first to deprive her of her child, I cannot imagine. At the expiration of a fortnight he came again, and then, to judge by the result, there must have been a fearful scene. She invoked curses on his head and her own, and prayed

that their infant, if spared, might live to bitterly revenge the wrongs of its mother. From that night she became mad. For some time no one knew anything about it. When the poor maniac's occasional bursts of frenzy could no longer be concealed, Madame Lemaire was questioned, and compelled to acknowledge the truth. Thus were gleaned the scanty details I have given you. She stated on oath that she had no further information to communicate, beyond the admission that six hundred and twenty-five francs were paid her quarterly by an unknown hand."

"Did she continue to reside at the cottage?"

"Yes, until the death of her unfortunate charge. You may remember I told you it was taken for three years. After that period she retired to a lodging. For a year and a half poor Marguerite, mad Mar-

guerite, as she was called, wandered aimlessly round the neighbourhood, protected by her harmless insanity from either injury or insult. One summer evening Père Joseph found her in the cemetery, cutting up the turf with a knife, a black box lying by her side. She said it was her child, and that she had come there to bury it. The good father lifted the box; it was full of gold—to judge by her incoherent rambling (if one is justified in believing anything so horrible)—the gold for which it would seem she had sold herself and her offspring. With some difficulty he led her home, placing the ill-gotten treasure under lock and key, that it might not continue to haunt her recollection. From that day she gradually grew weaker. Père Joseph visited her constantly; and praise be to the saints and the Virgin, a lucid interval was vouchsafed before death.

She had been brought up in the English heresy; but, by the grace of his prayers, renounced her former errors, was received into the bosom of the Church, and left the box of gold to be expended in masses for her soul. This much the holy father vouchsafed to tell me himself," added the old lady, crossing herself with edifying humility; "the rest of course was under the seal of confession."

There was a brief silence, and then the stranger, without attempting to express her thanks for the narrative, in which she had evidently been deeply interested, inquired abruptly—

"Is Madame Lemaire still living?"

"No; she died many years ago. Before her death the good father went to see her, and implored her to confess, which she did; but it is my impression that very little of the truth was known even to her.

That Monsieur Lefèvre had the cunning of the Evil One. I could see it in his eyes."

"Is Père Joseph dead too?"

"Oh no, madame; he lives on the road to N——. He was confessor to the Countess Théophile, mother of the Count Alphonse, and at her death she left him some property, so that he might be able to end his days near her son."

"The Count Alphonse? Is it Monsieur de St. Pol of whom you are speaking?"

"The same. Does madame know the Count?" inquired the old lady eagerly, with something of additional reverence in her tone.

"No; but I have heard the name."

"Ah, the Count is a noble gentleman, so good to the poor; though they do say he is not much given to religion. He has just married an English lady. Madame

should see her; she is beautiful as an angel."

"Indeed! But talking of this poor Marguerite; you say she was so lovely. Is there any picture of her?"

"Monsieur le Curé had one taken after her death, so that she might be identified if any of her relations came to inquire. The painter lodged at our auberge, and gave me a copy as a remembrance of his visit. It is somewhere in the house; madame can see it."

On their return to the inn the picture was sought for, and speedily produced. It was that of a corpse, with closed eyes and arms crossed on the breast. The features bore unmistakable traces of beauty, but of a dark and repulsive character. Whatever Père Joseph might see fit to assert—if that face was the face of a penitent, it would seem that the spirit of evil had revisited

the cold clay to thwart the painter in his office. Unappalled by its ghastly appearance, the Englishwoman's countenance lighted up with vindictive triumph.

"I would give a hundred francs to have a correct copy of that likeness. I suppose you would not part with the original?"

"I should not like to do that; but if madame is in earnest, the copy can be easily managed."

"I am quite in earnest. There is a pledge to begin with." And she laid a bright gold coin on the table.

The old woman's eyes glistened.

"It is done, then. Madame will give me her address?"

The stranger instantly wrote a few words on a slip of paper which she tore from her pocket-book.

"I may depend on receiving it in time?"

"Without fail, madame."

“It is well. Thank you.”

Then, beckoning to the driver, she spoke in a half whisper, unheard by the inhabitants of the auberge, who were standing in a group around the door.

“You know the direction. To the château of Monsieur de St. Pol.”





CHAPTER IV.

LE PREMIER PAS.



THE château de St. Pol was an old baronial residence, approached by an avenue of lofty trees. The grounds and outworks were in excellent preservation; yet there was an air of departed greatness about the edifice itself that accorded well with its time-honoured name.

The Count was accustomed to spend two-thirds of the year at Paris, or in making a tour of most of the European countries; but he had an excellent representative in his steward, who was not merely the collector of his rents, but also the dispenser of

his numerous charities. Monsieur de St. Pol preferred this original method of doing good, to expending large sums of money in the service of a church to which he nominally belonged; though mass he attended rarely, and confession never. The pious Countess Théophile long grieved in secret over the spiritual degeneracy of her only and much-beloved son; and unable to win him to her views during her lifetime, sought to extend her influence from another world, by securing in his behalf the prayerful vigilance of her confessor. However, Père Joseph soon found his office was likely to prove a sinecure. Spiritual duties towards the lord of the château, he had literally none. Monsieur de St. Pol invited him to dinner, listened to his stories, and laughed at his exhortations; a mode of treatment which afflicted him even more than estrangement. But long as the

good priest had been accustomed to his patron's latitudinarian views of religion, he was inexpressibly scandalized to find that, during his residence in Paris, he had thought proper to unite himself to a heretic. The only consolation he could derive from the transaction, was the discovery that Marion (whose religious opinions were more lax than her husband's) had made no conditions as to the issue which might hereafter proceed from their union. There lay his hope for the future; and in bright visions of infant proselytes and devout children of the church, Père Joseph almost forgot his vexation; and once even went so far as to speak of Madame de St. Pol as a promising subject for conversion. When first introduced, a something in her countenance appeared to trouble him, and he regarded her with a scrutiny that was anything but agreeable to the haughty

Countess. On closer acquaintance all this passed away. He was anxious to propitiate her goodwill, for the sake of the lambs of the flock, prematurely called into existence by his vivid imagination; and laid himself out with so much perseverance to accomplish this end that he finally succeeded.

To resume the thread of our narrative. The stranger—whom our readers have doubtless recognised as Margaret Nicholson—being anxious to avoid observation that might possibly frustrate her plans, determined to leave her conveyance at the second gate, and walk up the remainder of the avenue. Having reached the principal entrance she ascended the steps and rang the bell, unawed by the grandeur of the edifice, and heedless or unconscious of the fact that her dress and appearance on foot, and unattended, were hardly such as to

warrant immediate admission. She had no thought to waste on trivialities; her sole idea, her only aim, was that of a speedy vengeance on the man who had wronged her.

The clang of the large bell, unaccompanied by the sound of carriage-wheels, and at such an unseasonable hour—when the Count and Countess were on the point of starting to a dinner party—brought several servants into the hall, and occasioned no small degree of hurry and confusion. “Something was the matter. Some one was ill. Was the château on fire?” These and a multitude of other wild questions, and still wilder assertions, were instantly circulated; and the noise even reached the ears of Sir Desborough Denton, who was pacing up and down the large dining-room, impatiently waiting, not so much for the moment of departure, as for the preceding

quarter of an hour. However, he was too deeply engrossed by the game he had in view, and too much intoxicated with the prospect of success, to take any notice farther than by closing the dining-room door. Marion alone must break in on that enchanting reverie. She had promised to come to him as soon as the Count went up to dress, and he was even then expecting her.

Ever since the renewal of this dangerous intimacy, the Countess de St. Pol had been living in a state of unnatural excitement. The sensation of fear had rapidly worn away beneath the all-absorbing influence of the only man who had ever stirred the depths of a nature where passion was so largely predominant and principle so weak. At the outset she shrank from meeting him; yet within a week from that first interview she only seemed to live in his

presence, and spent the long intervals of his absence (for he was far too cautious to arouse the Count's suspicion) in a ceaseless craving that nothing but his society could soothe.

Marion was generally very late in dressing. On the evening to which we allude she began half an hour earlier, and then dismissing her maid, sat listening with feverish anxiety for the sound of her husband's tread on the landing. His dressing-room faced her own, with a space of fifteen feet between them ; but it required a keen ear to detect even a man's footstep on the rich soft carpet which (in imitation of the English custom) at the time of his marriage he had had laid down in compliment to his bride.

At last! Yes, the door is closed, and she, the wedded wife, the traitorous betrothed—twice warned in vain—is free to

keep her appointment. For one brief quarter of an hour, a little longer perhaps—a mote in time, an eternity in passion—*he* will be with her, be with her *alone!*

With noiseless movement she descends a flight of stairs comparatively little used. There are two entrances to the dining-room; she chooses the one opposite the hall, and lays her white hand on the fastening.

One moment's agitated pause. Has not her guardian angel entirely deserted her? Is it not yet too late? Will she draw back? A hair's weight might turn the scale. It is soon decided. *He* is within the circle that she trembles to cross; she hears his impatient footstep as he strives to while away the seconds that separate them; feels, panting with emotion, what no bolts or barriers can shut out—the call of the strong nature that answers her own, and the

die is cast. What to her now, for one passionate moment, is the sanctity of the marriage tie; the thought of right, or the dread of detection? His arm is around her, his lip pressed to hers!

“Il n’y a que le premier pas qui coûte.”

When, after some little delay, the front door was opened by the old seneschal, the apparition of a hard-featured woman in black, who spoke very bad French, and was evidently in an unamiable temper, tended rather to increase than diminish the general curiosity. Who could it be? Was she mad, or had she come to announce some terrible calamity?

“Is Mr. Hayes within?”

“Monsieur Hayes, that is the father of Madame la Comtesse,” observed the old man, in an under-tone, turning to his second in command. “What had I better

say? He is not here, but he is expected."

The person addressed shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows, which gestures, though they were doubtless intended to convey a great deal of meaning, did not appear to promote Margaret Nicholson's good-humour. Glancing at the first speaker, she angrily repeated her question—

"Is Mr. Hayes within? You know very well to whom I allude—the father of your Countess. Is he here?"

"Pardon, madame. He is not come, but he is expected."

"When?"

"That I cannot say."

"Then please to ask the Countess directly."

"That I cannot do without some very good reason. Madame is dressing. I could not think of disturbing her. It would be

as much as my place is worth. Monsieur le Comte and Madame la Comtesse are just going out to dinner. They will start in half an hour. Madame is a stranger. No, I could not do that."

"Then I will stay and ask her myself."

And, to the utter amazement of the servants, she deliberately sat down on one of the hall chairs.

There was much whispered consultation, but the stranger's assurance seemed to imply that she knew what she was about, and that she had some claim on the father of the Countess, which the Countess herself would not care to dispute; so that, after many suspicious glances and sundry insinuations that it would be better to call again to-morrow, she was left to do as she thought proper.

A few minutes before the time of starting Marion tore herself from Sir Desborough

and hurried to her own room, so that she might be found there quietly waiting, when her husband came to call her. As the clock struck the half hour she descended the stairs, leaning on his arm. Sir Desborough met them in the hall. The carriage was already at the door.

Suddenly starting from her seat, Margaret Nicholson, in her dusty travelling dress, and with a degree of self-confidence that contrasted strangely with the meanness of her attire, confronted the brilliant triad.

“Will Madame de St. Pol oblige me by stating when Mr. Hayes is expected to arrive?”

The Count was an English scholar, consequently he understood perfectly all that was said. His pride could ill brook the freedom of such an address to his wife, and his colour rose.

“Woman, you forget yourself! The Countess de St. Pol is not to be so abruptly spoken to by a stranger.”

“Madame de St. Pol will tell me,” persisted Margaret, without heeding the Count’s indignant remonstrance, fixing her small black eyes full on Marion’s countenance. The latter had not at first remarked her appearance. All at once it flashed into her mind where and when she had seen her. Dreading what might follow, and conscious there was a mystery which at all hazards it would be prudent to keep from her husband’s knowledge, she eagerly interposed—

“Mr. Hayes is not here, but we expect him on Thursday.”

The Count frowned angrily, but the round of mortification was not yet complete.

“It is my impression that he will alter his mind, and not visit you at all,” pursued Margaret, still detaining Marion with her

eyes, as the serpent is said to fascinate the trembling bird. "You must give me his present address."

"This is too much!" exclaimed the Count, with an oath, in which he very rarely indulged in the presence of a lady, at the same time dragging his wife towards the door.

"Tell me at your peril!" whispered Margaret.

"17, Rue Rivoli, Paris," cried the Countess, in an agony of terror, apprehensive of she knew not what, as Monsieur de St. Pol, furious at this double indignity, half led, half pushed her into the carriage, and then, forgetting his wonted politeness, sprang in after her, leaving Sir Desborough to follow.

"Ay, ay," muttered Mrs. Nicholson, as she walked slowly through the avenue, while the carriage flew rapidly before her ;

“ he is not here, but he shall not escape. It is well to have two strings to one’s bow. This day has placed him doubly in my power. 17, Rue Rivoli, Paris. I shall not forget that. For the rest I must wait. Ha! ha! Love waits; why not revenge?”





CHAPTER V.

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW.

IT was the twentieth of May ; a lovely spring morning, warm enough for a stroll without any extra protection from the weather. At least so thought Lady Morton and her party, as they turned out of the breakfast-room and dispersed themselves over the lawn. The Dowager Lady Glendon and her daughters, Captain Lenham, and Molyneux Temple were again visiting at the Grange.

It was the second day after their arrival. The two elderly ladies, Florence and Gertrude, Harry Lenham, and the young law-

yer, having paired off, left Mary Morton standing near her brother. Seeing that he was alone, she threw down the wreath she had been weaving, and laying her hand playfully on his arm, endeavoured to draw him into conversation.

“Frederick.”

“Well, May?”

“Florence and I want you to help us in arranging our picnic for Thursday.”

“Cannot you dispense with my assistance? Oh, I suppose you want me to invite some more men?”

“Exactly. We are almost two to one.”

“A very unsatisfactory state of affairs certainly. Well, I will see what I can do.”

“And, Frederick, do ask those unfortunate boys who never go out anywhere. You know them—we do not.”

“Who? The Dacres?”

“Yes. We can let them have the low

pony-carriage. Ah ! there is my pet. Arte, you darling, come here ; kiss mammy."

This was Lord Dunorven's way of pronouncing " Mary." He had now nearly attained the age of eighteen months, and had learnt to say a few easy words in English and Italian ; as well as to give utterance to a number of unintelligible sounds, apparently a mixture of both languages, which Mary Morton, in her extravagant fondness, fancied that she alone could interpret.

A noble boy, of precocious intelligence and beauty, with large black eyes and clustering curls. He was making an essay in walking, by hanging on to Ponto, who kept closely at his side, and submitted to his caresses with the most imperturbable good humour.

As soon as the little Viscount caught sight of Miss Morton he stretched out his

arms with a cry of delighted recognition ; but in so doing lost his balance, and was rolled over by Ponto, who evidently mistook it for fun.

Sir Frederick called off the dog, while Bianca began to lament over the embroidered white frock (the work and present of Mary), which, in more than one place, bore obvious traces of Ponto's paws.

"Never mind the dress, Bianca. You are not hurt, my precious one?"

"No hurt," lisped Arte. "No hurt. Pon—pon."

A melancholy smile overspread Sir Frederick's countenance as he watched his sister playing with Lord Oxenten's child, and thought how fully and entirely the sacrifice of wounded pride to brotherly affection had been permitted to succeed.

At a sign from his master, Ponto had stretched himself on the turf, while his

loving brown eyes wandered wistfully from one to another. Mary Morton, her cheek bright with the glow of returning health, lifted Arte from the ground, one moment holding him at arm's length, the next pressing him close to her, and almost smothering him with kisses. In one of these embraces Lord Dunorven plunged his chubby fingers into the folds of her soft dark hair, which, as it happened to be very lightly fastened, yielded to his grasp, falling like a rich drapery over her graceful neck and shoulders.

It was a lovely picture. Involuntarily Sir Frederick wished that the Earl could see her thus ! But the next minute, with the strange inconsistency of human nature, the thought of her happiness became painful to him, and he turned away to indulge in one of those solitary rambles which now formed his chief enjoyment. Leaving the

garden, he crossed the park, and sat down on the trunk of an old tree.

The Baronet was sadly altered. Even the presence of his most intimate friends failed to rouse him from the state of morbid depression into which he had been so long plunged. On more than one occasion Lady Morton had privately consulted Dr. Mayhew. The good doctor, not knowing what to say, although he had a shrewd suspicion of the truth, prescribed plenty of cheerful society, and, if possible, immediate change of air. However, on this last point Sir Frederick was inflexible. He would either go to London or remain quietly at home. London, the doctor said, was not by any means advisable; and Lady Morton, secretly grieving over an indisposition which she intuitively felt was more that of the mind than the body, was forced to acquiesce. The idea that her son still

suffered from the breaking off of his engagement with Miss Hayes—which had somehow got afloat among the tenantry—was gall and wormwood to her hereditary pride; and in the attempt to rectify it her thoughts flew from one scheme to another with inconceivable rapidity. If she could only induce him to invite some of his friends. For a long time Sir Frederick resisted her entreaties. He was not well, and did not feel up to amusing them. What good could it do him? No; he would not be bored. So Lady Morton changed her tactics, appeared to be convinced, and let the subject drop. Soon afterwards she hit on the feminine expedient of declaring that the Grange was so dull she could scarcely endure it. Morton immediately proposed that she should ask the Glendons. Then, pressing her advantage, the good lady artfully suggested that

he might ask Captain Lenham and Mr. Temple for a few days during their visit—"it would make it so much pleasanter for the girls." Inwardly provoked yet unwilling to refuse her anything that was not visibly prompted by her anxiety respecting his health, the Baronet gave a reluctant consent.

As he sat there alone, plunged in a sorrowful reverie, Lenham suddenly stood before him.

"So there you are! I was wondering what had become of you?"

Sir Frederick looked up wearily.

"I thought you were in the garden."

"So I was a few minutes ago. We have all been romping with Oxenten's boy. What a glorious urchin it is! as self-willed and rosy as Cupid himself. In the midst of our fun, Bianca—by-the-by, what a pretty woman she is—declared it was time

to go to bed; at which Lord Dunorven roared. Miss Morton vowed that I made him much worse; so, to avoid exemplary chastisement, as well as to be out of hearing of such inharmonious sounds, I bolted, leaving the ladies to settle the dispute among themselves. Temple is gone in to write a letter."

The Baronet made no reply. He scarcely seemed to hear. By any other person his conduct might have been construed into rudeness, but Lenham was too deeply interested to think of himself.

"I wanted you to walk with me through the wood. Will it tire you?"

"Tire me? What nonsense! My mother has been cramming you. One would think I was an invalid."

He tried hard to be cheerful, but it was not a very successful effort. After half an hour's indifferent conversation, Lenham

(who had been for some time fidgiting with a letter which he held in his hand) asked abruptly—

“What do you think of that writing, Morton?”

Anxious to avoid a forced confidence, he put the inquiry as one of ordinary curiosity. The effect was startling, if not altogether unexpected. Sir Frederick’s cheek blanched, and he turned fiercely on his questioner.

“By what right are you in possession of her letter?”

Then, meeting the look of sympathy in his friend’s eyes, his tone softened.

“Forgive me; I am mad, I think—maddened by misery. Harry, for God’s sake tell me how you came by this paper?”

“I do not know the writer except by name and sight. It is from a young lady to whom one morning I lent an umbrella, which she forgot to return. A Miss Field.”

“It must be Edith,” murmured the Baronet, half to himself, as Lenham hesitated to proceed, unwilling to confess that he had followed the young stranger to her lodging. “It must be Edith; I should know her handwriting among that of ten thousand. Harry, in pity have you no clue?”

Feeling that under the circumstances it was better to tell the whole truth, Lenham related how he had first met the beautiful artiste at the studio in Regent Street; how the interest excited in his mind by her evident knowledge of Sir Frederick, had prompted him on another occasion to ascertain her address, in the vague hope of rendering some service to his friend.

“Then you have found out where she lives. Thank heaven for that! Harry, you do not know what you have done for me! You cannot tell what a weight is lifted from my mind!”

“ My dear fellow, I am *so* glad !”

“ What number did you say ?”

“ I do not recollect the number. You cannot mistake it. It is on the left-hand side. Wilmot, Berlin Wool Repository.”

“ I shall go at once. There is a train at a quarter past one ; I can catch that easily. Harry, you had better take Chestnut, and ride half way to the station. You can repeat the direction en route, and I will give you part of a history which I never thought to entrust to any one.”

He spoke in a tone of joyous animation ; his features beaming with the sunshine of resuscitated hope.

Lenham was inexpressibly relieved, and not a little curious. Telling Lady Morton he should be back to luncheon, he hurried to the stables ; Sir Frederick having commissioned him to give the necessary orders, while he went upstairs to dress and offer

some plausible excuse to his mother. His agitation and excitement did not escape her observant eyes. Indeed, he was too much overcome by this sudden joy to entirely conceal it from her. Yet she did not venture to remark it. So great a barrier had the events of one short year thrown up between the two who were once so united!

Lenham rode nearly six miles; but Sir Frederick did not volunteer the much-wished-for explanation. At the half-way house they parted.

It was a quarter to three when the Baronet arrived in London. Without allowing himself a moment for rest or refreshment, he sprang into a railway cab, and bribing the man to increase his speed by the promise of an extra half-crown, was rapidly whirled from Paddington to Holborn, and put down at the corner of the street which Lenham had described.

And now came the trying part of the journey. Now, for the first time, he began to question with himself, what kind of reception would await him? How would the high-spirited Edith regard his equivocal repentance, and the renewed offer of his hand? Might not her pride have enabled her to conquer an affection which in practice, if not in theory, he had once dared to measure by the gauge of social position? As he walked slowly down the street, longing for yet almost dreading the moment of their meeting, his thoughts were not entirely those of unmixed joy.

Surely this was the place which Lenham had so carefully depicted. Past the second turning to the left, at the corner of the third street, next door to a small stationer's, but a little farther back, standing, so to speak, in a recess. A few seconds more, and he would be in her presence, that presence so

long denied him, and for which he had thirsted as the desert traveller pants for the refreshing spring. In her presence, to hear from her own lips an avowal that should make him the happiest of men, and roll away, like the shadow of a hateful dream, the avalanche of misery beneath which his better nature had so long lain crushed—or—— But he would not think of the alternative.

He looked up. There was the well-remembered heading—

“Wilmot, Berlin Wool Repository.”

The next moment he staggered, as though struck by an unexpected blow.

The shop was shut up, and the shutters were closed.



CHAPTER VI.

THE RUE RIVOLI, NO. 17.

IT is at all times an unsatisfactory task to trace the career of a bad man from one crime to another; but if in one sense unsatisfactory, it is at any rate useful, as a proof in point how very little real enjoyment can ever be purchased by sin.

For that there is in wrong-doing a pleasure of a certain kind, no one who knows anything of human nature will pretend to deny. It is only its poverty, its transitoriness, and the sharp stings of remorse by which it is accompanied, that afford a scope to the novelist or playwright to deduce a

moral alike terrible and strong. The Best of Books describes the state of the wicked as being without "peace." The man of corrupt desires and evil actions may have pleasure in this world—peace he has never.

Margaret Nicholson's random assertion that Bernardin Hayes would not visit the Château de St. Pol, proved to be correct. Conscience-stricken by the singular coincidence that the home of his daughter in her married life should be in the immediate vicinity of the spot where her mother had been wronged and abandoned, he invented one excuse after another to put off accepting the Count's invitation; and at last, under the plea of a compulsory return to England, declined it altogether. Yet the twenty-fifth of May found him still lingering at Paris, in the luxurious suite of apartments which he had taken in the Rue Rivoli, No. 17.

“Money, money, money!” he soliloquized, as he paced restlessly up and down the magnificent saloon. “That woman is my curse. A thousand pounds! What could she want with it? What, indeed! the payment of a little longer silence? She has not betrayed me yet, as far as I can ascertain; but the vindictive spirit which marks her present course of action warns me what I may expect if the proofs are ever in her hands. What can be her motive? Revenge? Can it be Hester? Bah! She died more than twenty years ago. How should anything transpire so long after her death? Can the dead speak? I never wronged *her*; at least no more than any man may wrong a woman with her own consent. I did not leave her to starve; she had money enough to keep her like a lady; and, had she lived, I should have managed to take some notice of the child.

As it was, the thing became impossible. The seduction of her daughter was an offence that, once known, that old hell-cat would never overlook. I knew that well, and kept away from Oxenten on purpose, though the girl was pretty enough to warrant almost any amount of indiscretion.

* * * * *

“She served me once, and I paid her right handsomely, instead of which I ought to have shut her up in a lunatic asylum. Had I done so at first, all this might have been avoided. And now she is in the south, of all places in the world, almost within a stone’s throw of St. Pierre. Pooh! I am a coward. Why should she go there? And if she did, what would it signify?”

Still he did not feel quite easy on the subject. The undefined nervousness, which like a shadow dogs the heels of the evil-

doer, saw a judgment in trifles. Taking up a decanter that was standing on the table, he poured out nearly a tumblerful of wine, and drank it off at a draught.

“Strange! I never heard the locality of this detestable château till a week after the marriage. My visits to St. Pierre were so short and interrupted, that I learnt very little of the neighbourhood. I wish Marion did not know. Circumstances might arise which would make it rather awkward. Yet she knows nothing beyond the outline. I was obliged to tell her she was not my child-in-law, in order to make her amenable to reason. Now that she has made a splendid marriage—now that her future is secure, I can shift for myself. How St. Pol would swear if he knew her real history! Ha! ha! Yet it would be no laughing matter. He is as proud of his untainted blood as the descendant of a hundred kings.

No bar sinister in his armorial bearings. It might drive him to seek a judicial separation. How he went into my genealogy before the marriage was finally arranged. Lucky it was all smooth sailing. Ha! what is this?"

A servant entered, bringing in a silver salver, on which lay a thin sheet of paper, folded and fastened down like an envelope.

It was a letter from Marseilles.

Mr. Hayes tore it open with trembling eagerness; glanced wildly over the contents; then, pressing his hat down over his eyes, rushed from the house in a state bordering on distraction.





CHAPTER VII.

THE LOST DIAMOND.

MARGARET NICHOLSON'S visit to the château did not tend to improve the domestic relations between the Count and the Countess. Though irritated and indignant, Monsieur de St. Pol was too proud to seek an explanation; while, apprehensive of the possible consequences, Marion studiously avoided any allusion to the subject.

Sir Desborough still lingered in the neighbourhood, and still continued on the same apparently friendly terms with the man whose unsuspecting hospitality he had so grossly outraged.

Immediately after breakfast, the Count was accustomed to spend two hours in his study ; either transacting buisness with his steward, or indulging in some of the speculative theories which at all times attract the attention of the most profound thinkers of the day. Meanwhile his beautiful wife amused herself by writing letters to her English acquaintances, or in rambling over the romantic pleasure-grounds that surrounded the château—the last new novel in her hand.

For some days it was remarked that the Countess's walks appeared to tend one way. This—in a large household, where many of the domestics were comparatively unemployed—was sure to excite suspicion. The circumstance was freely commented on in the servants' hall, and the Count's confidential valet (one of those invaluable characters who hear all and say nothing),

without entering into the conversation of his fellows, determined to ascertain for himself whether there was any truth in the general observation.

On the eastern side of the château there was a tolerably extensive grove. Beyond this a winding path, shut in by trees, led to a deserted summer-house, which had been suffered to fall into decay. Tradition declared that a discarded suitor of the Countess Théophile shot himself there in a fit of jealous fury, within a few weeks of her marriage. The affair was hushed up, and no one ever knew the truth; but there was some mystery about it, and stains of blood were still visible on the old oak floor.

One lovely morning in May, a few days after the dinner party to which we alluded in a preceding chapter, as they were leaving the breakfast-table Marion said to her husband—

“Are you going to drive to-day, Alphonse?”

“Not this morning. Sir Desborough Denton is going to ride with me at one. I can drive you out later if you like.”

“Oh, never mind. I can take the carriage and go in with Elise. I have some shopping to do, which you will be very glad to avoid. I wish though, as you intend to ride with him, you would ask Sir Desborough to lend me the book he was speaking of the other night. One cannot get any new English novels here, and they are such a time sending them from Paris.”

“Very well; but why not ask him yourself? Shall you not be here?”

“I don’t know. I am going to read in the grounds, and then I have letters to write which will detain me until luncheon.”

A few minutes later the Countess de St. Pol, apparently absorbed in her novel,

might have been seen crossing the lawn in the direction of the grove. When she entered the thick shade she paused to listen, and then glancing stealthily behind her, involuntarily quickened her pace. As she came in sight of the summer-house, a tall figure brushed cautiously through the under-wood, and advanced to meet her. It was Sir Desborough Denton.

Very lovely looked Marion in her large sun-hat; her cheeks flushed with recent exercise; her natural hauteur lost in the agitated tenderness which he alone had power to call forth. Dangerously lovely, as her little white hands abandoned themselves to his grasp; the hazel eyes half veiled under their long lashes; the full, ripe lips, that neither sought nor shunned; yet, once yielded, clung responsively, as if touch alone were needed to fire the latent train of passion, and bring into full play the

perilous fascinations of that enchanting form.

Hardly conscious what he was doing, Sir Desborough loosened the elastic band that confined her hat, and placed it on the rustic table in the middle of the summer-house.

Without, in the closest shelter of the friendly trees, the rustling of whose branches alone broke the stillness, crouched a startled watcher, his white face gleaming in the shadow.

He had seen thus much ; but he could see no more, for the stone walls interposed a barrier ; and the side of the little enclosure originally open was almost entirely shut in by a growth of luxuriant vegetation.

In less than half an hour Marion came out alone, looking, to the spectator's fancy, strangely unconcerned and calm, though

her cheeks were flushed and her hair slightly disordered. Keeping without the path, a few yards back, concealed from view by the dense foliage, he followed her to the grove. On entering the parterre she resumed the perusal of her novel.

Meanwhile what had become of her companion ?

Satisfied that there was nothing more to be gleaned from the movements of the Countess herself, the man returned to his former station, and after some hesitation, resolved to explore the summer-house.

Having carefully scrutinized every corner, he was about to retire, when his eye fell on something sparkling in a crevice of the wood. It was a small diamond.

As Marion crossed the threshold of the hall, the Count appeared in the side entrance.

“I have been searching for you every-

where. Where have you been hiding yourself?"

"I? Reading in the grounds."

"So I supposed; but I could not find you. None of the gardeners had seen you pass."

"I fancy they must have been rather more industrious than usual," rejoined Marion, forcing a laugh. "But what is it, Alphonse? Has anything occurred to postpone your arrangements for this morning?"

"No, I was merely thinking that, as the day is so fine, you might like to ride with us. It would be a good opportunity to try the Arab. Jean tells me he has been well exercised, and is perfectly safe."

"Thank you, Alphonse. Yes, I should like it very much. I can put off my shopping till to-morrow, and the letters must wait. How long will you allow me to dress?"

“Half an hour,” replied the Count, looking at his watch.

At a quarter to one Sir Desborough Denton rode slowly down the avenue. The Count’s valet, who had contrived an errand which brought him to that side of the house at the very instant of the Baronet’s arrival, came up, and civilly touching his cap, took the reins as he dismounted.

Jean Delahaye’s keen grey eyes wandered eagerly over the dress of his master’s visitor, or rather over the accessories of dress, for in the dress itself there was nothing to give him a clue. From the chain hung a bunch of what are commonly called “charms,” while the wristbands and the small portion of shirt front that was visible, were fastened with plain gold studs. Suddenly his gaze became fixed. Sir Desborough wore a light blue tie, on which glittered a horseshoe pin, richly set in

diamonds. One of the stones of the shining circlet was missing.

When Marion came out, leaning on her husband's arm, Sir Desborough lifted his hat, as if that morning they had not met before, and greeted her with well-assumed surprise, professing himself delighted at the unexpected pleasure, but without betraying any undue empressement.

And Marion, consummate actress as she was, gave him the tips of her gloved fingers, and, assisted by Monsieur de St. Pol, sprang lightly into the saddle with scarcely even a deeper shade of colour; though the rapid throbbing of her heart, in the thrill of excitement that invariably accompanied his presence, might have been easily discerned beneath the close-fitting bodice of her riding-habit.

As Sir Desborough and his companions rode off, attended by a groom, Jean Dela-

hayé, who had lived with his master from childhood, and cherished a kind of clan-like interest in the family honour, groaned in bitterness of spirit as he foresaw the terrible task before him, and thought—amidst all the surface splendour that surrounded his beloved lord—of the dark gulf *creusé à fond*.





CHAPTER VIII.

DISHONOURED.

DISHONOURED! It is an ugly word; a word that is hard to bear—harder still to those whose sense of justice to themselves has been fostered by long centuries of hereditary pride.

The next morning after breakfast, Monsieur de St. Pol was seated in his study, the door closely locked, while before him, pale and trembling, stood Jean Delahaye, frightened alike at the news which he had just communicated, and the alternate paroxysms of fury and disbelief which stung the Count's fiery nature into temporary madness.

In the first shock of indignation, he felt as if he could have taken Jean by the throat and dashed his brains out, for his daring aspersions on the honour of the Countess—his so recently wedded wife. Then, in quick succession, came the distracting thought, that possibly at that very moment (if the man's story were true) she might be with Sir Desborough; and he sprang impetuously from his seat.

“That will do, Jean. It is enough; you may retire. Rest assured your fidelity shall not go unrewarded.” Then, with a strange inconsistency when contrasted with the preceding expression, he added, “But you have no proofs in support of this extraordinary story, and a St. Pol condemns no one unheard. Not another word,” he exclaimed, imperiously, seeing that Delahaye was about to interrupt him. “Not another word. Leave the room instantly, and be

silent as you value your life. Stay, give me that diamond."

And once more alone, for the space of five minutes he sat down with the glittering stone held firmly between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, while the left held his throbbing temples, that seemed as if they were pressed by a circlet of fire.

Five minutes! Those five minutes might have been an age in the horrible consciousness of irretrievable misery! However much he might strive to delude himself, in his secret soul he had no doubt of the fact. Jean's veracity, as proved through many years of faithful service, was beyond impeachment.

Ever since the first week of their marriage a persuasion had gradually sprung up in the Count's mind that Marion had never really loved him; that it was merely the reputation of his wealth and the splendour

of a noble name that had attracted her fancy and prompted her to yield a favourable answer to his suit. Coupled with this came the impression (now revived with terrible distinctness) that a dark suspicion—a suspicion that had once crossed his mind with the rapidity of lightning, and the traces of which his manly, generous nature had since thrust from him as suggestions of the Evil One—might have been, after all, but too well founded.

Maddened by the recollection, he could bear it no longer, and, crossing the hall, went upstairs to the Countess's boudoir. The door was ajar, and he pushed it open.

Marion was reclining on a couch, absorbed in a novel of the "Guy Livingstone" class, which had just been sent to her by Sir Desborough. Looking up for a moment she met her husband's cold, penetrating gaze.

“Why, Alphonse? How you startled me! How white you are! Is anything the matter?”

She looked so innocent, so perfectly unconcerned, save for the implied anxiety lest he should be unwell, that the Count's heart smote him for being ready to condemn her unheard.

“Is anything the matter, Alphonse?” repeated Marion, laying down her book, and slightly raising herself upon her elbow.

“Nothing. My head aches: that is all. I came to ask if you will drive with me to-day?”

“Now—directly?”

“Yes, now. Why do you hesitate? Have you an engagement, or do you not want to go?”

Marion got off the couch with a low, silvery laugh.

“My dear Alphonse! you are cross. Of

course I want to go where you wish. I will be ready in ten minutes."

And suiting the action to the word, she rang the bell, and began to smooth the bands of her rich soft hair.

Monsieur de St. Pol passed the remainder of that day and the following night in a state of miserable incertitude. There was a vague suspicion in his own mind that fitted in with Jean Delahaye's otherwise unsupported testimony, and almost drove him frantic, during the four-and-twenty hours that must necessarily intervene between the report of Marion's misconduct and the moment when he could put it to the proof.

At last! Breakfast was over, and as usual they parted: the Count ostensibly retiring to his study; the Countess saying she should take a book and sit in the grounds, until he was ready to join her.

"How long shall you be, Alphonse?"

she asked negligently, as her husband hesitated, his hand on the fastening of the door—perhaps reflecting that this might be really their last meeting—his whole soul torn, yet determined to see it to the end, to know the worst, and then—— He had sworn to revenge to the uttermost his insulted honour, and to exact a fearful retribution both from the man who had wronged him and the perjured woman who, false to her marriage vows, false to her wifely rectitude, had dragged his hitherto untarnished name into the foul abyss of her sin.

“How long shall you be, Alphonse?”

The Count started.

“Two or three hours at the least.” He would *give her the opportunity*. If she had already betrayed him, the sooner he knew it the better. “Two or three hours at the least; indeed, I do not think I shall be disengaged the whole morning, so you had

better make up your mind to be happy without me," he added, in a tone of suppressed bitterness, that to any one less pre-occupied than Marion might have given rise to unfavourable conjecture.

Striding across the hall he entered his private room, and instantly locked the door. Then, taking down a thick, strongly-made riding-whip, he tried it once or twice with a kind of fierce exultation, snatched his hat from the table, threw back one of the windows that opened on the opposite side of the house from the road which Marion was expected to follow, and, having satisfied himself that no one was in sight, leaped out on the turf.

While the Countess trod leisurely through the gay parterre and the shadowy grove, only venturing to hasten her steps when (as she thought) safe from observation in the winding pathway, the Count, striking

out some distance from the château, described three-fourths of a circle, which, allowing for the length of his stride, he got over in less than half the time that would have been required by any ordinary person.

When Marion reached the summer-house her husband was within a dozen yards of her, leaning breathlessly against a tree.





CHAPTER IX.

CÆTERA DESUNT.



AVE you heard the news, More?" said one English gentleman to another, as they met in the principal street of N——.

"Can't say I have. What is it?"

"A certain gay Lothario has been doing the devoted to the beautiful Countess de St. Pol—doing it in style, too, I should imagine, to judge by the result."

"No! Denton?"

"Even so. It seems St. Pol caught him under circumstances that left no doubt of the fact; called him to account in no

measured language, and winged him pretty successfully this morning."

"You don't mean it?"

"But I do, though."

"I fancied they were on such extravagantly good terms with each other. The Count took him up completely; introduced him to all his own set; was seen with him everywhere. Denton must have played his cards uncommonly well."

"Ay. He is au fait at that sort of thing. You remember Thérèse Fauchon?"

"Yes; but there is all the difference in the world between a Countess and the wife of a simple bourgeois."

"A fig for the difference! Love levels all. It is but a woman."

"I know you do not entertain any great respect for the sex. However, what has become of the fair lady?"

"Confined to her own apartments in a

sort of honourable or dishonourable captivity—whichever you please—under strict surveillance, en attendant the arrival of her father.”

“And St. Pol?”

“Gone—no one knows whither. The reminiscences of this place cannot be exactly agreeable. I believe he is under the impression that he has killed his antagonist.”

“So bad as that?”

“I should think the chances were about even. Denton was insensible for hours. I called just now. He had come to then; and the first thing he did on regaining consciousness was to send for a lawyer. The ball passed between the ribs, and lodged under the shoulder-blade. They succeeded in extracting it after a long and painful operation, but the case looks very critical.”

“Poor fellow. He has been going the pace lately, and no mistake; yet I cannot help feeling sorry for him. He was a capital companion. My opinion is much the same as your own. The women are to blame.”

“Yes. The Countess de St. Pol was beautiful enough to drag any man to perdition. Do you recollect my advising him to take care the day he went up to resume the acquaintance?”

“Perfectly. It would have been well for him had he followed your advice. What say you to a game of billiards?”

“With pleasure.”

And the two friends turned into one of the fashionable gambling-houses which abound in every French town.

Exhausted by loss of blood, pale and ghastly, his head supported by pillows,

his hair damp and matted clinging round the low broad forehead, Sir Desborough Denton lay on a couch in a large room on the ground-floor of one of the principal houses in N——. They had brought him thither in the first instance for convenience; and the surgeons in attendance declared that it would be dangerous to remove him. His eyes were partially closed, and from time to time his lips quivered with the agony of his wound; but his voice, though weak, was distinct and clear. He was eagerly dictating to a notary, who was seated at a small table near him. His favourite attendant, a gay, light-hearted Frenchman, in whose small, sharply-cut features grief and alarm contended with surprise, knelt at his master's feet.

Sir Desborough was dying. Still he continued to dictate, urging the writer

with the agitated haste of one who feels that his moments are numbered. Presently he looked at his servant.

“My poor François; you will miss me. Monsieur le notaire, a legacy for François Saint-André.”

It was soon written in due form, and the two doctors, who, in obedience to the wishes of their patient, had retired to a little distance, came forward to write their signatures as witnesses.

“There is one thing more,” murmured the Baronet feebly. “Write—— Stay, I will write it myself. Give me the pen. What does it matter?” he added, as one of his medical advisers made a gesture of dissent. “I have scarcely an hour to live. What does it matter? Do as I tell you.”

He motioned François to draw the table closer, and then, with difficulty raising

himself upon his elbow, wrote as follows:—

“Morton, I am dying. The manner of my death you will learn elsewhere. When you read this note, the hand that traced it will be cold and still. Let that induce you to grant the last request I shall ever make to any one on earth. I have made my will in favour of a boy who is mine by right; mine by all a father’s love, though not mine in the eye of the law. In that will I have striven to repair as far as possible the wrongs of the past, both as regards poor little Harry and his mother. *She* only knows me under the name of Ravensworth. Morton, I adjure you, by all your hopes of happiness hereafter, watch over my child, and guard him by every means in your power from the evil courses through which I must shortly stand in the

presence of my Judge. I have made you my sole executor, for you alone, of all those whom in former times I have called my friends, can I entirely trust.

“You will not refuse the request of the dying? Farewell.

“DESBOROUGH F. DENTON.”

He folded and directed the letter, while François brought him sealing-wax and paper. The exertion of writing brought on a fresh paroxysm of pain. His countenance became livid, and large heat-drops glistened like beads on the straining surface. One of the doctors held a cordial to his lips.

“Thank you. Now tell me how long I have to live?”

The two medical men looked at each other.

“Speak! why do you hesitate? I know there is no hope. How long? The latest?”

“ Possibly two hours.”

“ It is well. All leave me. I wish to be alone.”

He was obeyed, only François lingered, and falling on his knees by the side of the couch, murmured in a voice broken by sobs—

“ My dear master—the priest ; let me go for the priest.”

“ The priest !” replied the dying Baronet, rather as if thinking aloud than speaking to his servant ; “ what priest can heal the sins of a lifetime ; reconcile wrong with right ; make things that have been as though they were not ? No, François, no ; my fate is beyond man’s decision, I must meet it alone.”

Alone, in the gathering twilight—for the evening is drawing to a close ; silently, swiftly, in strange sad harmony with the life whose last sands are falling from the

hour-glass of time! Alone, to cross the bourn which all must cross, unaided, unsustained! Alone, or worse than alone, with the ghosts of lost opportunities and misused talents filling the charnel-house of memory, where there is not one bright spot to soften the dark outline of an existence in which passion has reigned supreme!

A large clock stands on the chimney-piece; its monotonous "tick, tick," breaking the solemn stillness of approaching dissolution. Seven thousand two hundred seconds! They are passing, even as he reckons them; they will not wait for his repentance—not one—not one.

Repentance, is there yet time?

* * * * *

Cætera desunt.



CHAPTER X.

SOME ONE WAITING FOR BERNARDIN HAYES.



TWO days after the occurrences just related, in the close of the evening, a postchaise passed rapidly along the avenue which led to the château de St. Pol. Before the postillion had time to dismount, the door opened, and Bernardin Hayes sprang out. While he was discharging the fare, the old seneschal made his appearance.

“Some one is waiting for you, sir.”

“Waiting for me? Who? What? The Count is not here?”

“No, sir, my dear master is far enough away, poor gentleman! Certainly he is not waiting to see you.”

“Who is it then? Man, you trifle.”

“A person. Heaven preserve us—here she comes! Your Excellency can see for yourself. Holy Virgin, I like not her expression. It is the evil eye. She might be the sister of Cain,” repeated the man in an aside, as he drew back a few paces, taking care, however, to remain within hearing.

Margaret Nicholson came out of the darkness in the background, and stood beneath the lamp.

“Yes, Mr. Hayes, I waited to see you. I have been waiting many days. I knew you would come at last, and the hour that I hoped for has arrived. We have much to talk of. Shall I speak to you here? I at least have no fear of a witness.”

Bernardin Hayes seemed like one stupefied by a sudden blow.

“Shall I speak to you here?”

The words fell like the hissing of a serpent. Their sense roused him to the consciousness of a shame yet to be avoided.

“I will see you presently. My daughter, the Countess——”

“Oh, I know your errand. Your business can wait, and mine cannot. Again I ask you, shall I speak to you here?”

“No, no. Come this way.”

He opened the dining-room door, and closed it as he followed her in.

The large gas chandelier, dimly burning, partially dispersed, but did not entirely overpower the surrounding gloom. The rich furniture, and groups of white statuettes, rendered yet more striking by contrast and marked by alternate touches of light and shadow, had a ghostly and unnatural aspect. At the end of the long dining-table stood Bernardin Hayes, his

fingers nervously clutching the hasp of his purse, which he had taken out to pay the postillion. He was very pale, and looked sick and faint, like a man who has been dragged to the edge of a precipice, and compelled to gaze over into the abyss below.

Margaret Nicholson's keen black eyes read these signs with a malicious pleasure, but it was not her intention to overpower him at once. With the acumen of the inquisitors of old, she wished to reserve his strength, so as to prolong the torture at will.

"Sit down. You had better. Our interview is likely to prove a long one; unless, indeed, you prefer that I should act without talking. Shall I?"

"No, no. Woman, you will drive me mad!"

"Not yet; that is to come. Are you ready?"

His conscience gave her the mastery. Mechanically he took the chair she offered him, and sat down, covering his face with his hands.

Three and twenty years! Was it in truth so very long ago? Their positions were strangely reversed. He, the rich man, trembling in her presence; she, once the hired dependent—a tool in the hands of another—now the destined avenger of wrong; wrong that had lain buried in the earth, and risen again at the eleventh hour, in the spectral garb of an unrepented sin. Truly our vices “make whips to scourge us.”

She looked at him for a moment with a smile of gratified malice.

“It has come at last. The day that I have worked and waited for, so many weary months. The proofs are to hand; the child of your brother lives—lives to claim her

inheritance; the lawyers have established her identity. Your ill-gotten gains must go—go, not one thousand or two thousands—not by driblets, as you would have bribed me to silence, but all—all.”

A smothered groan burst from the lips of the fallen man, but he made no answer.

“I have a good memory; yours, perhaps, is beginning to fail you. Four-and-twenty years ago you had an elder brother. He died very suddenly—no matter how. The evidence is wanting.”

“Devil!” exclaimed Bernardin, livid with terror. “Would you have me understand that—that—— Would you dare to insinuate that I murdered my brother?”

“I insinuate nothing, Mr. Hayes. It could only be a case of ‘Non proven,’ as the lawyers have it. There is no need for insinuation; you and I have to deal with facts as they are. I was merely observing

that your elder brother died very opportunely, leaving a beautiful young wife, who, contrary to your expectation, proved to be enceinte. She had no friends in England. Your brother kept no company whatever; and at his death Mrs. Hayes showed no disposition to alter her previous style of living. She remained shut up in her apartments, plunged in grief for the loss of her husband, and waiting the arrival of her child. I was her personal attendant. You know by what means you bound me to your interest. Her time came on. She died. No need to specify the reason. She might have been neglected. She died, and fortune seemed to favour your schemes. You managed to obtain a false certificate, and the child (supposed to have been born dead, and buried with the mother) was conveyed away, and shortly afterwards exposed; while, according to a codicil to

your brother's will, you became possessed of the whole of his enormous fortune. There the matter rested, and might have rested for ever, but for one false step on your part. I had a daughter, a lovely, innocent girl of seventeen. Guilty as my own life had been, I kept her from all knowledge of evil, as I would fain have guarded her from the very winds of heaven. It was for her sake that I was greedy of gold—for her sake that I sold myself to you. You saw her—her face attracted you, or you wanted a new toy, and thought it fair game to play with her simplicity. But do not think she betrayed you. She died within the year, leaving her child to my care, her injuries to the vengeance of heaven. For one-and-twenty years I remained in ignorance of the name of her seducer. I did not even know that you had seen her. My punishment was to come. Her

orphan child, whom I had loved as my own—your daughter, Mr. Hayes, your forgotten and neglected daughter—was taken from me just as she was engaged to be married, at the age of twenty-one. Her death brought to light the missing link in a terrible story. Poor Hester had entrusted the proofs of her child's parentage to the clergyman of the parish, not to be opened until she came of age. Not knowing what else to do with them, he placed them in my hands, and thus enabled me to fulfil the oath of vengeance I had sworn. You know me now, Mr. Bernardin Hayes. What think you of the last act in a life's tragedy? Is it not well played? And your *other* daughter, she whom you took from the cottage at St. Pierre to inherit your late wife's fortune! Ha! have I touched you? I have learnt her history too. I know, and you know, that she

has no more legal title to your name and fortune than she who sleeps under the yew-trees in Oxenten churchyard—not so much, maybe, since Hester's child was the elder. She, Marion, Countess de St. Pol, whose faithlessness to her marriage vows has at last forced you to this neighbourhood; she, whom you will take away with you dishonoured—more deeply dishonoured than the victims of your own licentiousness; she, the beautiful, the gifted, your idolized heiress; she, whom you have loved as I loved Hester—is the child of Marguerite, mad Marguerite. You have good cause to remember the name. You see I am pretty well informed. Ha! ha! an excellent comedy! The two Margarets, a mother and a grandmother—the one daughter and the other daughter—the living avenging the dead. Marguerite—mad Marguerite. I have her picture with

me. Would you like to look at it? It may freshen your memory. She is quiet enough there—more quiet, I reckon, than when her charms first attracted your notice. Ha! ha! We change, don't we? You are not as brave a man as you were then, though the scar on your face has died out. See!"

Quick as thought, she drew the likeness from her pocket-book and laid it before him on the table.

Excited almost to frenzy by the conviction that there was no longer any chance of effecting a compromise, and that the interview had been sought merely with a view to torment him, Bernardin started from his seat and seized her roughly by the arm.

"Do you want me to murder you?"

His eyes were swollen and bloodshot, his features deformed by the evil passions so rudely dragged from their hiding-place by

the unsparing hand of an accomplice, at once the instrument and the avenger.

“Are you mad? Do you want me to murder you?”

It was an ominous question. The time, the place, the temper of the man, unrestrained, unscrupulous, where his interests were at stake; the daring lesson she had given him; the all that he knew depended on her silence—would have made any other woman in the world draw back; but Margaret Nicholson had passed the stage of bodily apprehension. A smile, that Satan himself might have envied, played icily round the corners of her mouth, as she answered,

“Ay, do. *I should like you to be hanged!*”

His hold relaxed. He fell back, appalled by a vindictiveness to which his experience had found no parallel, as, in Dante’s

Inferno, we may picture the lost spirits cowering before those greater in guilt.

“Ay, do; the lawyers will follow you up. My task is performed. The case is made out, and the addition of another deed of violence will put the finishing touches to your character. Come on. I am ready.”

She drew herself up to her full height, folded her arms, and looked at him.

Bernardin Hayes ground his teeth in impotent fury.

“Have you anything more to say to me?” he muttered.

“No, I am satisfied. The law will take its own course now. Farewell, Mr. Hayes. The Countess de St. Pol is expecting you.”

And with this parting shot, Mrs. Margaret Nicholson conveyed herself away.

The insolent mockery of her last speech

was lost in air. For more than an hour after her departure, Bernardin sat leaning forward on the table, his head buried in his hands. His mind was a chaos. Stunned by the rapidity with which one blow had followed another, he was incapable of reflection, and appeared to have alike forgotten where he was and what he came to do. From this state of stupor he was roused by the entrance of a servant.

“I beg your pardon, sir. I knocked more than once, and, as no one answered, I thought you were upstairs.”

“Thought what? Ah, I remember. Where is your mistress?”

The man led the way with ceremonious politeness. On the landing they were met by the old seneschal, apparently stationed there to keep guard over the disgraced Countess.



CHAPTER XI.

LOWER AND LOWER.



STRAIGHT on, sir, if you please."

A door was opened, and instantly closed behind him, and Bernardin found himself in a large, elegantly furnished room, where all around bore evidence of the Count's solicitude for the comfort of his beautiful bride. Marion's harp, piano, workbox, and many other lady-like personalities, marked it as her especial retreat; but there was an air of desolation about it which even the brilliant gas-lamp was unable to dispel. A poor little canary, kept awake by the glare, and unfed that

morning, chirped disconsolately from his gilded prison; and a delicate Italian greyhound, that had been lying unnoticed on the rug, roused by the sound of the stranger's footstep, came forward with a low wistful whine; but there was no one in the room.

After a moment's hesitation Mr. Hayes passed on, and entered the adjoining cabinet, where he encountered Elise.

"The Countess is lying down, sir. Will you go to her, or shall I tell her you are here?"

"No; never mind. I will speak to her myself."

Marion was half reclining on a couch, resting one flushed cheek upon her elbow. From the day when, unconscious of her husband's observation, she left the scene of her guilty pleasure, with a promise to Sir Desborough that she would speedily

visit it again, she had heard literally nothing of all that had transpired ad interim. For reasons best known to himself, the Count had hitherto seen fit to spare her the details of his tragical revenge; though his orders, transmitted to her by the old seneschal, that she should consider herself a prisoner in her own apartments until the arrival of her father, plainly told that all had been discovered.

Anxiety as to the fate of her lover, coupled with the uncertainty of her own, began already to tell upon her health, which had been previously impaired by the dangerous indulgence of an unlawful passion and the consequent dread of detection.

As her father entered she started up. He looked at her for a moment, then, with a stifled groan, walked to the other side of the room and threw himself on a chair.

There was a long silence. At length, Marion, going up to him, laid her hand upon his arm. He started as though a serpent had stung him, but did not attempt to remove it. She bent down to him; her loose morning wrapper (she had not cared to dress) yielding to every movement, rising and falling with the tumultuous swell of her bosom; her rich hair dishevelled; the hectic spot on either cheek deepening in the effort to speak calmly; the eyes, unnaturally bright, shining under their golden-brown fringe; the lip, like a sculptor's model, whitening with apprehension. Fallen, yet lovely, oh, how lovely! A ruin, crumbling and blasted, touching and terrible in its weird-lost splendour, stirring the very life-pulse of the beholder by the imaged outline of all it might have been unscathed.

She bent lower and lower, till she sank

on her knees before him, clasping her hands in an attitude of mingled entreaty and defiance.

“Father.” How that word thrilled the ear of the listener. “You, at least, have no right to reproach me. The child of shame—shame is my portion. Be it so; it is my fate. I can bear it; but not this suspense. For two whole days I have heard nothing—spoken to no one. What has happened? Tell me the truth. All, all!”

She pushed back the tangled mass of hair from her once smooth forehead, where the sharp ploughshare of guilt had furrowed two small lines, which visibly contracted in the agony of that passionate appeal, rendering the likeness to her unfortunate mother so striking, that Bernardin’s superstitious terror was hardly a matter of surprise.

“All. Tell me all.”

Thus urged, Mr. Hayes began his trying narration: telling her the whole truth, in so far as he was able to supply facts from the Count's letter, and the news which had reached him on the journey. When, after some little circumlocution, he came to the result of the duel, the Countess sprang to her feet.

“Dying! Is *he* dying? Oh, my God!”

With a shriek that rang through the deserted rooms with horrible distinctness, she gazed wildly around her, as if in search of some one unseen; staggered a few paces, and fell down in a deathlike swoon.

Mr. Hayes placed her on the couch, and instantly summoned Elise.

“Look to your mistress!” he exclaimed, abruptly, “and see that everything is ready for her departure on the morrow.”



CHAPTER XII.

NORTON FARM.



O a generous and unselfish nature there is something unspeakably affecting in the sudden death of one whom, for some reason or other, we have regarded, if not exactly in the light of an enemy, at any rate with no very amicable feelings.

Morton's sympathy was strongly excited by Sir Desborough's letter. He had gone to his account "unhouseled, unaneled." His faults—no longer within the reach of human criticism—almost ceased to be remembered in the engrossing horror of his untimely end.

After Mary had left the breakfast-table to make her usual inquiries respecting the health of the little Viscount, Lady Morton sat watching the changes on her son's countenance with painful anxiety.

“Is anything the matter, Frederick?”

“Poor Denton is dead; shot (as a note from his lawyer informs me) in what is commonly called an affair of honour, in which——” His voice slightly faltered, and he became very pale. “Nay, do not look so startled. The name of the Countess de St. Pol is mentioned; the Count challenged him—and——”

He rose abruptly, and turned to the window.

“How dreadful! But, Frederick, I wish you would not let these things affect you so much. Think what a mercy it was that you escaped.”

“I know that; but I would rather not

talk about it now. Are you going to the Dacres'?"

"Yes, presently. Why?"

"Because I must start for London within an hour, and you may as well drive me half way to the station. I can walk the remainder."

Another inquiry rose to Lady Morton's lips, but Sir Frederick's expression was too stern to offer her any encouragement, and she contented herself with observing, "I suppose you would like to go at once?"

"Certainly; the sooner the better."

On his arrival in town Morton called at the livery stables, and selected a horse; then, taking with him Sir Desborough's letter and a slip of paper, on which was written the correct address, with the real and assumed name of the unfortunate Netta, set out on his melancholy journey.

Rather more than an hour's ride brought

him to the outskirts of the quiet little village. Meeting a farm labourer, he inquired for Rose Cottage.

“Down the street, sir, till yer come to the Plough; then turn to the left; ’tis the first house in the lane.”

“Thank you.”

He slackened his pace, feeling an instinctive dread of the task before him, then suddenly recollecting that Mrs. Lawrence and Minnie were lodging at a farm-house in the neighbourhood, he resolved to call there on his way. He might possibly hear something of Mrs. Ravensworth and her boy; something that might give him an idea how best to communicate the sad intelligence of which he was the bearer. If Mrs. Lawrence asked him he would stay the night, and go back to London in the morning.

Musing on the singular coincidence, that

Minnie Brooks, and another object of Sir Desborough's fickle fancy should both be living in the same locality, he turned into the court-yard of the little village inn. The master himself came to the door.

"Can you tell me which is Norton Farm?"

"Yonder, sir; among the trees. You can see the smoke rising."

"So near! Then I shall walk."

Consigning his horse to the stable-boy, with injunctions to give him a good rub down, and a substantial feed of corn, he started off in the direction indicated by the landlord.

"Norton" was a large old-fashioned house, with apparently no end of queer-looking, rambling rooms, with rafters crossing them in every direction; the walls half panelled; the upper surface white as the driven snow, putting to scorn the modern

invention of paper ; cupboards and crannies in all kinds of improbable places, and presses that seemed as if they were intended to hold a third of the linen bleached since the deluge.

Sir Frederick smiled to himself, as—ushered by a pretty rosy-cheeked maid-servant, in a muslin apron and neat print gown—he ascended the broad, easy steps of the old oak stairs. For a moment it seemed to him a caricature of the Grange. The absurdity of the idea struck him, but he could not account for it, and the sound of merry voices and subdued laughter broke in on the unfinished reverie.

Wishing to present himself unannounced he knocked at the door. The conversation ceased, and John Lawrence observed, half aloud—

“ Who on earth can it be ? Guess, for a wager. Surely it is Morton ! I should

know his knock anywhere! Come in."

Minnie, Mrs. Lawrence, and the Vicar of F—— started from their seats in delighted recognition.

"My dear fellow, where did you spring from?" "Sir Frederick, this is indeed an unexpected pleasure!" exclaimed mother and son in the same breath, as the Baronet, shaking hands with one and the other, turned to Minnie with something of his old cordiality.

"How well you are looking!"

"I am much better, Sir Frederick, thank you."

Her quick blush and expressive glance showed that she fully understood him.

"And now, do tell us what fortuitous combination of circumstances we may thank for this unanticipated treat," petitioned Mrs. Lawrence.

“Business, my dear lady ; business which will take me away again directly.”

“Did you come from Donnington this morning, Morton?” asked the Vicar.

“Yes.”

“And you must return at once?”

“Not exactly must.”

“Well, then, why not stay the night here ? We can offer you a bed. I am going to town myself in the morning, and we could start together.”

“I shall be very glad, if it is quite convenient to Mrs. Lawrence?”

“I shall be only too delighted,” rejoined the widow. “Remember, Sir Frederick, this is the first time you have allowed me to offer you hospitality.”

“Is it?” repeated the Baronet, constrainedly. He was anxiously pondering the task he had undertaken, and, when the

first flush of pleasurable excitement had passed, looked pale and careworn.

“Mother,” said John Lawrence, “there is the young lady that you and Miss Brooks used to speak of when I was last here.”

They all came to the window, below which, at a distance of about thirty yards, a narrow footpath led through some beautiful meadows, and finally branched off into the high road. A young girl, very simply dressed, and attended by an old servant, stood watching the gambols of a beautiful boy, who was alternately teasing and caressing a small black and tan spaniel. Something in the appearance of the triad struck Sir Frederick with a kind of presentiment.

“Her attitude is very sad,” mused the Vicar. “See how listlessly her hands are

folded one over the other. Her parasol has fallen on the grass, and she does not even stoop to pick it up. There, the old woman is touching her with it. She starts, and then falls back into the old weary attitude. You told me her name once, but I have forgotten it."

"Ravensworth—Mrs. William Ravensworth. They say her husband is an officer, that is—they say. Really, John, I know very little about her. We have not spoken lately. I have heard——"

What Mrs. Lawrence had heard was never clearly ascertained; for saying something relative to "business first and pleasure afterwards," the Baronet hurriedly excused himself, promising to return later in the evening.

When they were again alone, the widow observed—

"I think Sir Frederick is greatly altered.

He is so fitful and uncertain; not at all like what he used to be. It is a pity he did not marry Miss Hayes."

Minnie started as she heard the well-remembered name, coloured, and glanced timidly at John Lawrence.

And John Lawrence? Well, he kept his thoughts to himself.





CHAPTER XIII.

DOUBLY ORPHANED.

SIR FREDERICK first went to the Plough, to give some orders respecting his horse. Then, having allowed what he considered a sufficient time to elapse for Netta to return to the cottage (which she would do by a nearer way across the fields), he walked slowly down the lane.

It was the beginning of June—a lovely day, though not too warm. The air was full of fragrance, and the banks of the soft green hedgerows were fringed by a multitude of wild-flowers. His thoughts reverted

to a similar period in the preceding year; while memory, always more tenacious of sorrow than joy, brought before him a rapid retrospect of all that had transpired in the interval. Since the morning when, by Lenham's description, he had recognised, Edith in the interesting artiste, and had hurried up to London, hoping to secure an interview, his cruel disappointment had been ever present to his mind. Not all the sanguine representations of his friend, not all his offers of assistance (Lenham systematically haunted every place where he thought he might possibly obtain a glimpse of the beautiful Miss Field) could eradicate the morbid fancy that he was never destined to meet her again.

Lost in mournful reflections, he approached the cottage; but, as he laid his hand on the gate, the sudden recollection of the charge which had devolved upon him

was, for the time, sufficient to banish all thought of personal disquietude.

Netta had just come in, and gone to take off her bonnet and shawl. At the sound of a man's tread she rushed downstairs and met Sir Frederick in the hall. It was painful to see the flush of delighted surprise die out, as her glance fell upon the stranger. Little Harry followed her into the sitting-room, creeping close to his mother's chair, and looking shyly out from behind the folds of her dress.

The Baronet, naturally kind-hearted, was distressed by the piteous expression in her face, and sorely puzzled how to communicate his errand. For a moment his eye rested on Sir Desborough's noble boy.

"What a lovely little fellow!"

"Go and speak to the gentleman, Harry," whispered Netta, pleased at this remark.

Harry crossed the room, half timidly,

half defiantly; then, as if reassured by a nearer inspection, allowed the stranger to part his clustering curls, and draw him caressingly between his knees. Presently he looked up.

“ You are like papa.”

Poor child of contumely and wrong; never destined to know a father’s tenderness and care; orphaned and worse than orphaned by the stain of his birth—he had yet learnt to lisp the name that, to him, was but the shadow of an impossible reality. The deep pity in Sir Frederick’s countenance did not escape Netta. Her apprehensions were renewed with double force.

“ Do you know my —— Mr. Ravensworth?”

The Baronet could only answer by a look.

“ What is it? Is he ill? Why do you not speak? Oh, Willie, Willie!”

Gently as human tongue could frame

unwelcome message, Morton broke to the unfortunate girl the tidings of her loss. She neither spoke nor moved till all was ended ; then, as she leant back in her chair, the large tears rolling one by one over her pale cheeks, the words fell from her lips—

“ I am punished ! I am punished ! ”

* * * * *

Sadly and thoughtfully Sir Frederick walked back to Norton Farm, resolving to consult John Lawrence as to the most satisfactory method of providing for the education of poor little Harry, who, with a fortune of fifty thousand pounds, must not be left to grow up under the imperfect training of his mother. Sir Desborough had left Netta a life-income enough to support her in affluence. He would place the boy with a tutor, and she might reside somewhere in the neighbourhood.

That evening, long after Mrs. Lawrence

and Minnie had retired, the two friends sat talking over the circumstances of the duel, and the amount of responsibility thus unexpectedly thrown on Sir Frederick's shoulders.

After detailing what he thought might prove a happy arrangement, Morton observed—

“It now only remains to decide on whom the charge shall fall. Will you undertake it, Lawrence?”

“I? My dear fellow, I shall be delighted. Honestly, the addition to my income will enable me to——”

“Take to yourself a wife, eh?”

The young clergyman bent his head, endeavouring to conceal the genuine emotion that glowed in every feature.

“Then I cordially rejoice with you. Strange!—I had not a notion that you were engaged.”

“Nor am I, dear Morton. I have not even spoken on the subject; but I think—I hope——”

“That the fair lady will not refuse you? Well, you have my congratulations and good wishes. I suppose it would not be right to ask when—you intend——”

“Soon. I can speak now—it would not have been honourable to do so before. Besides, there were reasons. I must not be too sanguine even now.”

“Pleasant dreams,” said the Baronet, as they shook hands and separated for the night. “Let me know your success.”





CHAPTER XIV.

LOSING NO TIME.

THE next morning, an hour before breakfast, Minnie (who with returning cheerfulness had regained her old love for rural occupations), went into the garden to nail up some woodbine and clematis which she was endeavouring to train over a roughly constructed arbour. She had succeeded in accomplishing her object with the exception of fixing one unruly branch that grew quite out of her reach, when a quick step sounded on the gravel, and another moment brought John Lawrence to her side, his manly countenance glow-

ing with health and animation, though there was an undefined nervousness in his manner which speedily communicated itself to his companion.

“ Miss Brooks. Let me assist you. There, it is done. And now, may I beg a few minutes’ conversation with you, before my mother and Sir Frederick come down? You know I am going away to-day.”

Minnie became pale, then red, faltered, and looked very much inclined to cry. The Vicar of F—— was no coxcomb, but her agitation encouraged him to proceed. With gentle force he led her into the summer-house, and placing himself by her side, told her in a few brief, eloquent sentences how he had long loved her without a thought of requital; and how, quite recently, he had begun to indulge a hope that he was not entirely indifferent to her.

How Sir Frederick's kind thoughtfulness in securing to him a considerable increase of income (he did not say under what conditions), had put before him the temptation to ascertain his fate from her own lips, in a light which he felt it was impossible to resist.

Minnie, whose revulsion of feeling on the discovery of Sir Desborough's intended treachery, had been as strong as it was sudden, while her gratitude towards the young clergyman had certainly paved the way for a more tender emotion, was deeply touched by his simple, straightforward statement. She could not speak, but he read his answer in her eyes, and ventured to put his arms around her, and draw her to him in a close embrace.

For some minutes neither spoke, and then Minnie, recollecting herself, exclaimed with distressful eagerness—

“But oh, Mr. Lawrence, if you knew all?”

“I do know all, my darling; it is past; forget it as I do.”

“But you are so good, so noble; you ought not to marry such a one as I am.”

He bent over her with proud, calm fondness. His look said, “Why?”

“I have been so misguided, so foolish, so weak.”

“Have been,” he repeated softly, “have been? Well, yes, Minnie,” he continued, with deep and tender earnestness. “Cannot you imagine it possible that I may love you more, because, under God’s Providence, I was the instrument chosen to save you from that terrible temptation? And will not you love me better, cling to me more closely, become more indissolubly mine?”

“But if—if years afterwards—I should

meet—meet *him*—you would be ashamed for me; you would think of all that had been. And oh, if you despised me, I should die!”

Mr. Lawrence hesitated. It would be wiser to tell her. He knew that her only feelings as regarded the past were those of repentance and horror. The shock, if sudden, would be salutary.

“Minnie! Sir Desborough is dead.”

She shivered.

“Dead? How?”

“He was shot in a duel. I did not intend to tell you, dear, but your dread of meeting him made me feel that it would be better for us both. He is gone to his account; and with his actions in this life we have now nothing to do. It is all over. Henceforth we will live for each other. Make my happiness—God helping me, I will make yours.”

They sat there some time longer in the hallowed stillness of reciprocated affection, and might have sat there unconsciously for hours, had not Sir Frederick, finding the breakfast-table deserted, volunteered to oblige Mrs. Lawrence by going in search of the runaways.

“What? Minnie!”

Her flushed and tear-stained cheeks, and the Vicar’s beaming countenance, at once told how matters stood. There was no chance of running away. Sir Frederick held both her hands, and for the first and last time in his life, bent down and imprinted a brother’s kiss on her forehead.

“God bless you, my dear child. I am sure you will be happy.” Then turning from one to the other—“Eh, Lawrence, you seem to have lost no time. I congratulate you. By-the-by,” he added, hurriedly, as Minnie disappeared among

the trees, “does your mother know of this?”

“I rather think she has seen it all along, though I have never said anything to her. The fact is, I was very wretched all last winter ; but we will not talk of it now.”

Immediately after breakfast the two friends started for London, in company with Mr. Norton, the farmer, who had offered to drive John Lawrence in his “four-wheel,” while the Baronet rode. On the outskirts of the great city they separated, the Vicar of F—— to return to his country home, in all the excitement of a happy, accepted lover, peopling the then deserted chambers with bright visions of the future, and revelling in all the romantic anticipations of domestic felicity, which the clergy, more than any other class in England, so constantly indulge ; the wealthy farmer, to transact his business ; and Sir Frederick,

who did not purpose to return to Donnington until the evening, to while away a few monotonous hours, he scarcely knew how. As he rode quietly through a little street in the vicinity of the Edgware Road, he became the object of attention to two persons who were looking from a window on the first floor of a private house.

“It is he! I am sure it is; but oh, how wretchedly ill; how pale, how altered! What if he should not be happy? Oh, Jane—Jane!”

And the younger of the two women threw herself into the arms of the other, and burst into tears.

The Baronet passed on — mutely, unconsciously, as, in the midnight darkness, the stately ship is borne onward by the reflux tide, far back from the wished-for haven—passed as human hearts too often pass, unwitting, unobservant, never dream-

ing that—beneath the crust of conventionality, the thousand forms and ceremonies invented by the world of fashion and good-breeding to make and keep us strangers—each holds the half of a glorious image, one in heaven—disunited on earth—and holds it in vain! Passed, as his own sad fancy had portrayed, within the reach of unspeakable happiness, which, at the last moment, eluded his grasp.





CHAPTER XV.

LOVE'S RECOMPENSE.



ANOTHER month had passed. It was the afternoon of a bright summer day, and the numerous old-fashioned windows of the Grange glittered in the sunshine with a thousand magic hues.

The Italian nurse, who was suffering from headache, had gone to lie down, having, ad interim (greatly to that young lady's delight) entrusted Miss Morton with the sole care and responsibility of her infant charge. With the precocious instinct of childhood, the little Viscount was already fully aware of his strong hold on Mary's

affection; and in return loved and tyrannized over her to his heart's content. In fact, Lord Dunorven was becoming very much spoilt, though his naturally good disposition prevented his bursts of wilfulness being seriously regarded by any one except Sir Frederick, who on more than one occasion said to his sister, "May, I shall certainly write and tell Oxenten that you are ruining his boy." And then Miss Morton would turn aside, a brighter flush on her cheek, and a deeper light in her soft, dark eyes, striving to hide the momentary agitation to which those words had given rise, by renewed caresses of the rosy rebel whose waywardness had occasioned the reproof. She could not help indulging him, and the afternoon to which we refer was no exception to the general rule.

Selecting the most shady and secluded spot she could find, Mary threw her cloak

over a green bank, surrounded by a kind of natural arbour ; and intending to read, sat down, with the child in her lap, and Ponto stretched drowsily at her feet. Lord Dunorven did not seem to think this sufficiently amusing. He was soon tired of pulling Ponto's ears ; and, laying his fat little hands on the book, lisped, in tolerably distinct English—

“No 'ead. Mamie play.”

Miss Morton instantly put down her novel.

“My own darling !”

She pressed her soft cheek to his with the exclusive tenderness that had grown up in her heart, until it became almost a passion, and clasped him close to her with a long-drawn breath that was half rapture, half irrepressible longing. But Arte was not going to stay there quietly : he was bent on a romp, and before long had pulled

down Mary's beautiful hair, and thrown her sun-hat on the grass, while his peals of merry laughter rang in the distance like the echoes of a silver bell. Having accomplished this feat, he remained silent for a moment, gazing intently in her face; then pursed up his mouth for a kiss, prefaced by the grave remark, apparently the result of mature deliberation—

“Pretty Mamie. Arte love Mamie.”

Miss Morton's attention is too much engrossed to notice the sudden disappearance of Ponto. The intelligent animal starts off in the direction of the house, and presently returns, followed by two men, one of whom is Sir Frederick. The other—ah, who is the other?—older-looking, graver, sterner than when we saw him last, with deeper lines on his forehead, and his complexion bronzed by travel—the returned wanderer—Lord Oxenten himself.

He had come back unexpectedly, impelled by a father's irresistible desire to behold and embrace his first-born. When he arrived at the Grange, Lady Morton was out, and Sir Frederick immediately offered to accompany him in quest of the little Viscount. Ponto's sagacity saved them the trouble of a search. Soon they came within hearing.

"Arte love Mamie."

"Morton, let me meet them alone," pleaded the Earl, in an agitated whisper.

Sir Frederick wrung his friend's hand in token of sympathy, and went back; while Ponto looked wistfully in the opposite direction, hesitated, and then somewhat reluctantly obeyed his master's signal.

"Arte love Mamie."

The young father's heart thrilled with tremulous joy. It was his child's voice—his welcome home—the one great blessing

that God had given him as a seal of the past and a hope for the future.

Unable to conquer his emotion, and unwilling to alarm Miss Morton, he stood leaning against a tree. At that moment Mary rose, and turned towards him with Lord Dunorven in her arms. The sudden recognition was too much for her; she trembled violently, and would have fallen had not the Earl sprung forward and made her lean against him, at the same time endeavouring to relieve her of his boy. But in this he was not successful. Arte was frightened, and clung more closely to his protectress.

“Dear Miss Morton, I was too hasty. Forgive me. I fear I have alarmed you unnecessarily.”

“It is nothing, thank you,” faltered Mary, with a deep blush, trying to with-

draw herself from his encircling arm. The effort was fruitless—she could not stand alone, and pitying her evident distress, Lord Oxenten placed her on the bank, and sat down by her side, again endeavouring to possess himself of his child.

“Arte, darling, it is papa. Arte loves papa,” whispered Miss Morton, rousing herself to speak encouragingly.

Thus adjured, the little fellow suffered himself to be kissed, though without untwining his arms from her neck.

Poor Mary's hot cheeks were not improved by his wilfulness; and, summoning all her courage, she forcibly unlocked the rebellious fingers.

“Arte must be a good boy, and go to papa.”

For a moment the Earl's strong grasp closed over his restored treasure, while his bowed head and reverent attitude spoke

the language of inward thanksgiving. Finding, however, that the little Viscount struggled to regain his old position on Miss Morton's knee, he gave him back to her with a grave, tender smile.

“You shall teach him to love me, May.”

This was their betrothal. Mary felt that he intended it as such, though not a word had passed between them, and she was too much overcome by his presence to dream of a response. It was the first time he had called her by her Christian name—Sir Frederick's pet name—that to her, henceforth and for ever, would bear a new meaning. Unable to meet his glance she turned away, her long hair in luxuriant disorder—the result of Arte's mischief—falling around her like a veil.

Lord Dunorven's large black eyes wandered inquiringly from the one to the other; now reading the deep love in his

father's face, then watching Miss Morton with a look of puzzled dissatisfaction. Before long the reason of this became apparent.

“Mamie cry!”

Lord Oxenten did not speak, but he drew her to him. Mary faintly resisted, though she was scarcely conscious of anything but an undefined longing to escape.

“May, this must not be. I have not yet thanked you for your care of my boy. You must give me the right to comfort you.”

And bending over her, he took one long kiss from those quivering lips. When he raised his head to look into her eyes, the storm of agitation had passed, and a half-smile of trusting happiness played round the flushed, beautiful features.

All the suffering of the past—the weary waiting, the lonely yearning, the terrible

awakening to the consciousness that his love was another's, the dark night of despair, when nature refused to wrestle any longer with the anguish of unrequited affection—all was compensated!





CHAPTER XVI.

“ARTE.”



ORD OXENTEN'S gentleness to Mary did more than anything else to conquer his child's shyness. Before they rose to return to the Grange he allowed the Earl to take him in his arms; and after some little coaxing, consented to be carried home in the same manner.

Sir Frederick met them in the hall. Saying something almost inaudible about her hair being so untidy (of which, by the way, she had only that moment become conscious) Miss Morton rushed upstairs to her own room; while Arte, uneasy at the

departure of one friend, stretched out his arms and made a desperate effort to get at another.

“Mor! Mor!”

“What, you must go to ‘Mor’ now? There then.”

The little Viscount clung to Sir Frederick, but his face still turned towards his father with a look of bewildered interest.

“Morton, you spoil him,” laughed the Earl, his eyes glistening with fatherly pride as he marked the precocious intelligence and beauty of his wayward offspring. “You spoil him. He will think me an ogre.”

“Indeed! I have nothing at all to do with it. You must chide my sister, not me. Bianca and I are always trying to keep him in order, for which we occasionally get repaid by a roar and a piteous appeal to ‘Mamie.’ The fact is, Mary refuses to see

any fault in the child—an opinion in which, craving your pardon, I cannot entirely agree; though in her case,” he added, with a quiet smile, “I suppose it is natural.”

The Earl grasped his friend’s hand.

“Morton, it is all right. A lifetime of devotion may never be able to requite her loving care of my little motherless boy; but it shall be my chief study to promote her happiness. I will love, guard, and cherish her with my whole heart. So help me God!”

He spoke feelingly, his fine features glowing with emotion. Sir Frederick drew him into the study, and closed the door.

“I know you will. Wait a moment.”

Unwilling to prolong a somewhat trying conversation, he rang the bell. It was answered by Bianca, who, immediately she heard of Lord Oxenten’s arrival, ran downstairs, eagerly expecting a summons.

“So, Bianca,” said the Earl, kindly shaking hands, “sorry to hear you are not very well. Your little charge does you great credit.”

“Thank you, my lord,” replied the proud and happy foster-mother, with a smile of gratified affection. Then taking the little Viscount from Sir Frederick, she repeated in her own language, “He is an angel—a dear beautiful angel.”

A momentary expression of pain crossed Lord Oxenten’s countenance, as he once more folded his child to his bosom, murmuring: “My precious darling; bless you, Arte. God in heaven bless my boy!——” And to avoid betraying the recollections called forth by Bianca’s presence, he walked to the window.

With a suppressed sigh, Sir Frederick threw himself in an easy-chair, lost in a chain of mournful reflections that for a

time seemed to banish every thought of his friend.

Presently the Earl came back to the table.

"I was going to say, dear Morton, that if you have no objection, I should prefer our engagement being kept perfectly quiet for the present. I am sure this would be in accordance with your sister's wishes; and, for my own part, I rather dread being bored by questions and congratulations."

"I was about to suggest the same thing."

"Then we are agreed? And now, dear Morton, how shall I ever thank you?"

"My dear fellow, no thanks are needed. We are all so fond of that 'glorious urchin' of yours, as Lenham characteristically describes him, that I fear the chance of our losing him will occasion much doleful anticipation."

"But I may leave him with you until I can make arrangements for our marriage?"

"We shall be only too glad to have him. But Oxenten, understand me, talking of marriage, it must not be yet. Mary is too young."

"Too young for the cares and responsibilities which the married state brings with it? We may be able to overcome your scruples. You will not surely condemn me to set out again on my travels? I should go melancholy mad in that lonely old castle; and a bachelor life in London would be worse."

"I don't wish to condemn you to either alternative. There is a nice little shooting-box of mine within four miles of this place, which is very much at your service. Spend the next few months there, and Christmas with us."

"At the expiration of which time you will give me your sister?"

Sir Frederick laughed.

"I did not say so. We shall see."





CHAPTER XVII.

WALTER EALING.

SO the Earl returned last night," observed Mr. Seagraves, looking up from his paper as the servant closed the door after removing the breakfast things.

"Yes. I am really very glad. Do you think he intends to remain?"

"I am sure I cannot tell you, Nelly. His movements are very uncertain. I fear there is not much chance of his settling down in the good old English fashion; unless, indeed, he should marry again."

"None of the neighbouring families would be able to furnish him with a suit-

able bride," remarked Mrs. Seagraves. "The Honourable Mrs. Lumley has two unmarried daughters; very talented girls, I am told, but pitifully plain. Then, there is Lord Fitzherbert; his children are too young, scarcely out of the nursery. No, I do not think he will find a wife here. Do you, Robert?"

"I—what did you say, Nelly? I beg your pardon, my dear. My thoughts were so much engrossed with poor Mrs. Ealing's trouble that I did not really hear."

"Perhaps it is just as well that you did not; you might have given me a lecture on match-making. I was merely speculating whether there was any one in the vicinity likely to prove a desirable wife for Lord Oxenten."

"A very useless consideration, and one that I cannot stop to discuss. I must go up to the Castle this morning. Poor

Walter is incessantly asking to be allowed to see the Earl directly he arrives; and in order to pacify him I have pledged my word that he shall."

"Will you start directly?"

"I think I had better. Lord Oxenten is an early riser, and will probably ride over to Mr. Macfarlane's before luncheon."

"Do ask him to give you a presentation to one of the almshouses for my poor old woman."

"I will not forget."

It was nearly half-past twelve when the Earl, his arm linked in that of Mr. Seagrave's, came down the winding lane which led to Mrs. Ealing's cottage. It was a pretty, moderate-sized house, surrounded by a garden, with a stable and other farm buildings in the background. When Walter was in full employment as under-bailiff on the Oxenten estates they were in

very comfortable circumstances ; but, since his protracted illness, it was only the Rector's generosity, seconded by a large donation from Lord Oxenten, that had kept off the pressure of poverty. As they approached the swing-gate the young nobleman said to his friend—

“ You will see that they have every possible comfort, and place it to my charge. Poor Walter ! I am very much grieved.”

He entered the room with a look of deep commiseration, greatly shocked to see the alteration in his foster-brother's countenance. Walter was lying back on a couch, his long black hair hanging in damp clusters round his forehead.

“ Well, how are we to-day ? ” asked the Rector, cheerily, as the Earl shook hands with Mrs. Ealing, and then turned to the invalid with the extreme gentleness of

manner which, since his bereavement, had become natural to him when speaking to the afflicted.

“My poor Walter! You must have been very ill.”

The widow, unable to answer, made a sign to Mr. Seagraves, and they left the room together.

The sick man turned restlessly, apparently anxious to avoid meeting the glance of his visitor. Perhaps Lord Oxenten was aware of this anxiety, for he drew a chair to the small table at the side of the couch, and leant forward, partly covering his face with his left hand.

“Are you unwell, my lord?”

“No, Walter, no. My head aches, but that is nothing—it will soon pass. Mr. Seagraves tells me you have been wishing to see me for many months.”

“Yes. I could not die in peace with

the thoughts of vengeance against you in my heart, unacknowledged, unatoned."

"Thoughts of vengeance!" murmured the young nobleman. "How have I ever wronged you, Walter?"

"Now that I am on the confines of another world, it does not seem to be quite clear that you have wronged me, my lord; but I thought you had, and my feelings towards you were the same. I hated you; I prayed that you might suffer as bitterly as I; that your rank and splendour might be to you as gall and wormwood; that what you loved most might be taken from you, and hidden away in the cold earth; that you might know all the horrors of a lasting separation, the rending limb from limb, the cup of lifelong agony that I had to drink—drink even to the dregs."

The Earl shuddered, but did not reply.

“ When you came home last autumn I had planned to murder you. My gun was in readiness. I primed and loaded it with fiendish exultation. It was my intention to shoot you and then myself, for I did not wish to be hanged, and, if I were dead, I knew they would bring it in as temporary insanity, which would spare my poor mother’s feelings. I loitered about the churchyard that Sunday, for with such thoughts in my heart I could not enter the church. My gun was at home. I meant to take it out the next morning under a pretence of shooting rabbits. It would not do on the Sabbath. I was always outwardly religious, and dreaded being questioned. You came out and spoke to me, to me only of all who were there assembled, spoke to me kindly, to the man who thought to take away your life! I remember looking at you with hungry curio-

sity. The lines of agony on your face were to me a joy and delight. My sorrow was richly requited. I felt that it was a better vengeance to let you live and suffer. You think I had no reason for all this? Listen. There was one whom I had loved from her childhood, one who might have belonged to your own proud sphere, so far superior was she to any woman I had ever seen elsewhere. I loved her as the flowers love the sunshine. I adored the very ground on which she trod with a blind, reckless idolatry, as the poor Indian worships his god. She was my star, the one bright spot in my life. Her parents were dead, but her grandmother favoured my suit. All things looked cheering. I had no equal in the village, and never even dreamed of a rival. But a worm had coiled itself around the heart of my cherished flower. She whom I looked

forward to, one day, calling my own—my wife, my darling; she whom I had proposed to myself as the reward and end of my work, whose smile made all labour light, whose presence was my heaven, had poured out her whole soul, the soul that should have been mine, mine only, in a secret, hopeless attachment to you; *you*, a lord, a nobleman, so immeasurably above her in position; you who, from the cold heights of wealth and title, could have no thought, no feeling in common with her class and mine! And when the truth dawned upon me, I was mad. I cursed you in the bitterness of my lost love. But her, ah! how could I be angry with her? I pitied her too deeply. I thought that time might heal the wound, that she might yet live to bless me with the relics of that priceless affection. But it was not to be. Her health gave way. Day and

night I wrestled with my sorrow, and would not see that it was coming. She died in my arms. There was an interval of partial consciousness before her death ; and whose name, think you, was last upon her lips ? Yours ! *Yours !* Do you wonder that I hated you ?”

“No, Walter, I do not,” returned the Earl, deeply moved.

“Ay, I hated you as I had loved her, with the whole strength of my manhood, the whole force of my being. Yet now, in the light of the hereafter, I feel how wrong, how very wrong it was. You could not help it. You did not even know.”

Lord Oxenten was innately noble. Painful as the acknowledgment might be, he could not let his foster-brother die under a wrong impression of the truth.

“I did know, Walter. She wrote to me and told me on her death-bed. It was a

great sorrow to me at the time ; it has been a great sorrow to me since ; but I never dreamt of it before."

He took away his hand, and looked up for a moment. The traces of sympathy on his countenance seemed to have a soothing influence on Walter.

"Did you write to her?" he inquired, in a broken voice. "Did you answer her letter?"

"I did. How could I do otherwise?"

"And you were kind to her? You did not blame her, reproach her?"

"God forbid." Then seeing that Walter waited, as if expecting he would say more, he continued. "I wrote to her as I would have written to a sister, told her how painfully I felt for all the suffering of which I had been unwittingly the cause, and said everything that I could think of likely to soothe and reassure her."

There was a long silence. Presently Walter Ealing raised himself upon his elbow.

“Thank you, my lord. It was well and nobly done. It was like you, like your generous disposition. Many men in your position would have treated it as a matter of indifference or ridicule, or have exposed it as a jest to the ribald sneers of their companions. Most heartily do I thank you for your gentleness towards my poor lost love. Heaven bless you with the blessing of the broken in spirit. It only now remains to say that you forgive me all the wrong I have done you in intention; that you forgive me as, I believe and trust, that and all my other sins are forgiven elsewhere. I shall die easier then. I know you do forgive me,” he added pleadingly, looking earnestly in the Earl’s face; “you are too noble not to do so, but I should like to hear you say it.”

“ I forgive you, Walter ; freely, fully, as I hope to be forgiven. Can you forgive me ? Forgive me the unconscious instrumentality of all your suffering and hers ? ”

“ My lord, you never wronged me. I have nothing to forgive. Your innumerable kindnesses to me and mine are like coals of fire on my head. ”

The two men, the one so strangely linked to the other from the cradle to the grave, the dying yeoman and the English peer, clasped hands in the solemn stillness of restrained feeling. The shadow of death had hidden the diversities of station ; and neither Lord Oxenten nor Walter Ealing had a thought to waste on the unreal, as they gazed over the borders of the dark valley in the grand equality of a prospective eternity.



CHAPTER XVIII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

IT will be remembered that we left Edith towards the close of March, resolutely striving to overcome the depressing influence of a wasted affection, and seeking comfort—where to a rightly-balanced mind it is most commonly to be found—in constant and useful occupation. Her pupils were docile and affectionate, and their progress was such as to speedily bring her the offer of several other similar engagements. Prompted by anxiety on account of Jane Wilmot's health, Edith thankfully accepted everything that came to hand. Nor did

her unselfish kindness pass without its legitimate reward. The regular employment and salutary exercise (for she gradually accustomed herself to walk the greater part of the distance, avoiding the great public thoroughfares, and choosing the more quiet streets and comparatively secluded squares) insensibly brought about a healthier tone of feeling, and braced her energies, both physical and moral, with the efficacy of a powerful tonic.

One afternoon, near Montagu Place, she was accosted by an old man, whose appearance seemed to betoken extreme poverty.

“A copper, lady, for charity. I have had nothing to eat all day.”

Edith put her hand in her pocket; but she had only silver, and was deliberating whether she might afford herself the luxury of a donation, when her wrist was rudely

grasped, and she felt, rather than saw, that her purse had disappeared. She instantly threw back her veil, and looked round, just in time to see the thief collared by a gentleman, who fortunately had witnessed the occurrence. The delinquent, finding it impossible to secure his booty, threw it down, and at the same moment, shaking off the hold of his detainer with eel-like dexterity, ran off at full speed, the old beggar, who was probably a decoy, having previously set him the example.

The stranger, a fine-looking man of forty or five-and-forty summers, with an Irish vivacity of countenance, in whom the reader may not be displeased to recognise our old acquaintance, Major Lery, picked up the purse, and restored it to Edith, with a courteous bow.

“Thank you, so much.”

“I am very happy to have been of any

service—wish I could have given that fellow in charge, though.” Then, as his glance fell on her expressive features, he started violently.

“Heavens! what a likeness! My God, can the dead come back? Who are you?” he ejaculated, in tones of such thrilling earnestness that Edith was fain to answer the question without either comment or inquiry.

“My name is Moorfield.”

“That is not it,” he exclaimed, speaking hurriedly, and as if to himself—“that is not it; yet, if it be as I imagine, she would not know. The name, of course, would be different.”

His wild, agitated looks precluded the idea of insult. Besides, real feeling is contagious. Edith made no reply, simply because she knew not what to say; but, as regards conversing with a stranger in

the street, it is certain that at that exciting moment she no more thought of any impropriety than he did.

“The name—yes, the name would be different; but the age—there can be no mistake about the age. Young lady, I do beseech you, pardon me. Deem me mad, presuming, what you will; but as you hope for happiness here and hereafter, tell me truly, are you three-and-twenty?”

“I was three-and-twenty in March,” replied Miss Moorfield, in a low tone of almost awe-struck surprise.

“Three-and-twenty in March! March, the very month *she* died! Oh, what a tragedy! I must sift this to the bottom.” Then, again addressing Edith, “And you have no parents, no relations? You are an orphan, you say? Am I dreaming, or did my ears deceive me?”

“I am an orphan certainly, though I

did not tell you so—that is to say, I never knew my parents; but you must excuse me. Do not think me ungrateful. I cannot well talk to you here.”

“You are quite right,” replied the Major, warmly; “I owe you an apology. You will give me permission to call on you? There is my card.”

Edith told him the address of Jane Wilmot.

“Thank you so much. I will be with you early in the morning. I am afraid the excitement has been too much for you. Let me get you a cab.”

At that instant a close fly drew up before one of the neighbouring houses, and having been discharged was secured by the Major.

On reaching Holborn, Miss Moorfield immediately communicated the extraordinary occurrences of the day to her faithful old nurse. Mrs. Wilmot was in ecstasy.

It was the hand of Providence bringing dark things to light after the lapse of long wearisome years. Her darling Miss Edie would be "righted" at last. Any one might know that she "was born to be happy." She was "much too good to be a governess." And the old woman fairly cried with delight.

During the course of the evening Edith brought out the mysterious slip of paper, on which was written Molyneux Temple's name and address.

On the reverse side were the following pencil memoranda:—

" *March 17th*, 18—.

"Time between nine and ten P.M.

"At the foot of Holborn Hill.

"Occupation uncertain. Supposed to have been a clerk returning from the City."

“And you have had that paper all these months, my dear Miss Edie, and never told me anything about it? Why, you must have known it was for you! A kind Providence even made the wind His messenger, and you would not take the message that He sent you?”

“I was much too unhappy then, Jane, to care to inquire. Life itself had no interest.”

“And now?”

“Now,” repeated Edith, softly, while a beautiful expression came into her dark lustrous eyes, “if it should please God to give me a home and friends, or riches and position, I should value them for the accompanying power to do good.”





CHAPTER XIX.

THE MAJOR'S STORY.



HE next morning at eleven o'clock Major Lery came into the little Berlin wool shop.

Mrs. Wilmot received him in a flurry of excitement, and in answer to his courteous inquiry, "Can I see Miss Moorfield?" immediately opened the door of the little sitting-room. As he entered, Edith rose, and involuntarily extended her hand. He took it between both his own, with the natural warmth of feeling which forms so distinguishing a characteristic of his generous-

tempered nation ; saying, as he gazed on her lovely face—

“ You are even more like your mother now than you were yesterday.”

“ My mother,” murmured Edith, her eyes filling with tears ; “ my mother ! Oh, Major Lery, tell me of my mother. But,” she added, after a pause, faintly endeavouring to smile, “ I am too sanguine. You speak so confidently that you have made me feel almost as you do.”

“ Nor are we wrong, my dear young lady, depend upon it,” returned the Major, as he relinquished her hand ; “ but the story is a long one ; may I sit down ?”

There was a flash of humour in his face as he glanced round the scantily-furnished apartment.

“ I shall live to see you differently circumstanced.”

He drew a chair to the rickety table,

placing himself as much as possible in the shade.

“In order to make you comprehend the scene of yesterday, which unexplained might lead you to question my sanity, I must go back a space of five-and-twenty years. I was then just nineteen, an ensign in a marching regiment. We were quartered at Dover, where Gerard Hayes, senior partner in the rich banking firm, had been residing some months: it was said for the benefit of his health. He was an exceedingly handsome man, fifteen or sixteen years my senior, a little exclusive and eccentric, shunning society, and indifferent to general opinion. We became acquainted under somewhat peculiar circumstances. Mr. Hayes was accustomed to drive a very spirited mare, called Black Bess; probably from a fancied resemblance to her celebrated namesake. I never remember to have set

eyes on a more beautiful or more unmanageable creature. No one but Gerard himself could obtain full mastery over her. With him she was usually as gentle as a lamb. One day, as he was driving round the eastern quarter of the town, the mare took fright at something in the way, and dashed headlong to the cliff. The rein snapped, and there was no longer a possibility of restraining her. She made straight for a point where the road, narrow and rugged, shelved over the beach. It was an awful moment. I heard the clatter of her hoofs as I was lying on the path above, and with an undefined presentiment made a wild leap on to an intermediate bank, alternately sliding and scrambling the remaining half of the steep. Providence must have aided me, or not to save ten thousand lives could I have taken that desperate leap uninjured. The mare was within three paces of

me ; my sudden appearance startled her, and as I seized her by the fragments of the broken rein, she stood still before me, shivering and completely tamed. Mr. Hayes, who had resolved not to jump out till the last moment, preferring the faintest chance of escape to a certain misfortune, now got down. I shall never forget his fervent, 'Thank God!' as he wrung my hand. Some labourers coming up at this juncture, took Black Bess to her stable, while Gerard, linking his arm in mine, walked slowly homewards. He had not yet spoken to me ; but I could tell from his manner how much he really felt. As we reached the door of his house, he turned to me with grave kindness—

“ ‘ Young gentleman, you have saved my life. Is there any way in which I can testify my sense of the obligation?’

“ I hardly know what prompted me, but I

recollect looking at him with boyish admiration, and answering impromptu, 'Yes; treat me like a friend.'

"He seemed surprised, pleased, and an almost womanly softness shone in his fine eyes. 'Poor boy!' he murmured, 'he does not know the world as I do. How can he tell that my friendship is worth having?' Then again addressing me, he once more extended his hand. 'So be it. Come and see me to-morrow.'

"From that day I became his chosen companion. His noble mind and cultivated intellect were laid open to me like a book to the reader. His charities, numerous and extensive, were conducted in a spirit of sympathizing interest that made him appear rather the friend than the benefactor of those whom he relieved. On one occasion I remember telling him it was a matter of universal surprise that he never

went into society. 'They talk about it, do they?' he replied. 'Well, Frank, you have seen those whom I think most worthy of cultivation, since they *need* it.' And that was the great rule of his life. After we had been acquainted for some weeks, he told me he was going to introduce me to some of his particular friends. A few miles from Dover there is a pretty little village. To this he drove me one summer afternoon. Black Bess did not take long to perform the journey. We got out at a wayside inn, and, leaving the mare in charge of the innkeeper, Gerard started off across some fields, unconsciously leaving me to follow. I saw he was pre-occupied; and, as my reverence for him equalled my affection, I did not attempt to disturb him.

"Presently we came to a cottage on the side of a hill. The door was opened by a

little maid-servant, and we were ushered into a plainly furnished sitting-room, where sat an invalid lady.

“ ‘My dear Mrs. Meredith,’ said Gerard, taking her hand, ‘allow me to introduce you to the young friend of whom I have so often spoken—my almost brother.’

“We sat talking for some time, until Gerard, who was getting rather restless, asked, abruptly—

“ ‘Where is Lucy?’

“ ‘Gone down to the village. I wonder you did not meet her. She will be back directly.’

“While Mrs. Meredith was speaking we heard the sound of a light footstep, and in another minute a young girl entered the room. Ah, how lovely she was! But I will not attempt to describe her; description would seem to me a profanation even now, though it is five-and-twenty years ago.”

Major Lery paused for a moment, as if to regain composure; then, as he met Edith's eyes fixed on him with a look of breathless interest, continued—

“I can see her now. She ran up to Gerard, placing both her hands on his, her dark hair falling over her shoulders, her cheeks flushed with excitement, exclaiming joyously—

“‘Dear Mr. Hayes, I am so glad you are come.’ She did not see me until he spoke.

“‘Come, Frank, let me present you. I mean you to be friends.’

“Lucy—I must call her Lucy—was rather shy at first; but before long, with the natural bias of our age, we were on terms of brother and sister intimacy. Alas! it was not as a brother that I loved her, though I had no suspicion of it then. We met again and again, indeed it became an

understood thing that Gerard and I should visit the cottage together. One day—can I ever forget it?—he said to me, ‘Ask Lucy to go for a walk. I want to talk to Mrs. Meredith.’ I dare not dwell upon those moments of happiness, yet our conversation was entirely of him.

“That evening, as we were driving home, Gerard told me his plans for the future. Poor Mrs. Meredith was dying of decline. She was an officer’s widow. How they became acquainted I never clearly understood, though from a remark of Lucy’s I imagine it was through some great service he had been able to render them.

“Well, as we were returning to Dover, he told me how that very afternoon he had spoken to her mother, and how on the morrow he intended to speak or write to Lucy herself. He believed she loved him. How could she do otherwise? There was a

great difference in their age ; but though nineteen years her senior, he was only in his prime. He hoped and believed she loved him.

“ I do not recollect what answer I made ; probably some wretched attempt at congratulation ; but, at any rate, I succeeded in forcing myself to preserve an outward calmness.

“ The next day he proposed our going together. I tried in vain to excuse myself ; but he insisted, and, had I refused him, it might have given rise to uncomfortable feeling. It was my charge to sit with the widow, while Gerard and Lucy went out. Their absence seemed to me an age. When they returned, Lucy's deep blush and quivering lips, as she bent down to receive her mother's embrace, told their own story. At length, disengaging herself, she turned to me, murmuring in a low,

agitated voice, 'Oh, Frank, I am so happy.' Gerard stood leaning against the door, his manly countenance irradiated as I had never before seen it. As Lucy was about to pass, he held out his arms. She came to him with a sweet shyness, new to her, but inexpressibly winning, hiding eyes on his breast with the trustful fondness of a child.

"But why should I dwell upon those scenes? They were to be married in a month. The precarious state of Mrs. Meredith's health rendered her anxious to see Lucy comfortably settled. I still continued to go backwards and forwards with Gerard, for I wanted strength to tear myself from a dangerous fascination. Besides, to stay away might occasion inquiries that I could not very well evade.

"But the strain was too much. I grew pale and thin. My brother officers were

incessantly chaffing me, while my irritable temper increased their curiosity. I thought Gerard was too much engrossed by his own happiness to heed my altered looks, but in this I was mistaken. One night, as we were standing at his drawing-room window, looking over the sea, he startled me by the remark, ‘Frank, you are not looking well.’ I tried to brave it out, but it would not do. His kindness, his gentleness, completely unmanned me; and I ended by telling him the truth. He heard me in silence—his hand resting on my shoulder, his noble features reflecting every change of the wild agony that was torturing my young spirit to madness. I seem to see him still—so grave, so patient, so forbearing. At last he spoke to me—

“ ‘My poor Frank! Would that I had foreseen this! Would that I had known it in time!’

“And then he went on to say, that if Lucy had not loved him so supremely, he would have resigned her to me without a struggle, and with his wealth have enabled us to marry, striving to bury his own disappointment in voluntary exile. I could not withstand such nobleness of soul, and seizing his hand, implored him to forgive me; pledging myself by the help of Heaven to conquer every feeling that could militate against his honour. Thenceforward Gerard's chief care was to shield and console me.

“The day before his marriage (which was to take place quite privately in the little village church near Mrs. Meredith's cottage) he said to me, ‘Frank, Lucy wishes you to be present. Are you sure that you can stand it?’ I answered eagerly, ‘Yes, yes, a thousand times. You must let me be with you, Gerard, or I shall think that I have forfeited your trust.’

“They were married one bright spring morning. There was no one there but ourselves.

“He would not take Lucy from her home. With the generous forethought which characterized him, he refused to inflict one unnecessary pang on the heart of the dying mother.

“It was soon all over. From the hour of her daughter’s union with the man whom, beyond all others, she would have chosen for a son-in-law, Mrs. Meredith sank rapidly.

“They laid her remains in the village churchyard, and Gerard Hayes bore his weeping bride away from the scene of her bereavement, to spend some weeks in foreign travel. As I stood on the quay at Dover to watch their departure, he put a small packet into my hand, saying—

“ ‘It is a bridal gift from Lucy and myself, that you may think of your brother and

sister as one.' This, and the purchase of a lieutenancy, were my last remembrances of those whom I loved so truly."

With a deep sigh the Major took out of his pocket-book a well-worn case.

"When you look at these likenesses, I think you will scarcely wonder at my agitation yesterday."

Edith's trembling fingers could hardly undo the clasp. Within, on either side, were two beautiful miniatures. That on the right might have been taken for a portrait of herself; the other was the likeness of a strikingly handsome man, apparently between thirty and forty years of age. Seeing her emotion, Major Lery observed—

"You can keep it until the story is ended. Unfortunately the pain is to come.

"I have not yet informed you that Gerard

had a brother, as unlike himself as could possibly be imagined—a dissimilarity not alone observable in feature, but underlying his whole character. I knew this at the time, as I had been told it by others, though I was not personally acquainted with him till within the last ten years. Some little difficulty arose between the brothers, and shortly before his marriage Gerard gave up all interest in the bank, and invested the greater part of his property in houses and lands. It was to one of the palace-homes of England that he took his beautiful bride on their return from their Continental tour. I was then abroad with my regiment, but for some time we corresponded regularly. All at once his letters ceased, and in less than a month, to my consternation and horror, I saw in the papers an account of his death. How my heart bled for the bereaved young wife! God knows, no impure or selfish

feeling mingled with the deep grief which I experienced for the loss of one whom I had loved with a love 'passing the love of women.' Poor, poor Lucy! I wrote to her again and again, thinking that as she had called me her brother, I might claim a brother's right to comfort her. I wrote eight or nine times without receiving an answer, until, pained by her silence, and stung by the idea that she had probably seen through my former attachment, and was therefore determined not to write to me, I gave it up, endeavouring to bury all distressing recollections in the claims of my profession. Now, looking back through the lapse of years, and putting one thing with another, I am inclined to think those letters never reached their destination. When, after a prolonged absence, I landed at Southampton, I heard that the young widow of my beloved friend had died in giving

birth to a daughter, also dead; and that the mother and infant lay buried in one grave."

"But," interrupted Edith, greatly agitated, "if it be as you say; if the child also died, what can it have to do with me?"

"Gently, my dear young lady. I said that I was told so. You are not sufficiently aware of the wickedness of men. Would it not be easy to an unscrupulous character, like that of Gerard Hayes' brother (who by the provisions of Gerard's will was to inherit his enormous fortune, in event of the widow dying without issue), would it not be easy, by heavily bribing those in attendance, to practically ignore the existence of that child, if living, and speak of it as dead?"

Edith looked very thoughtful, but made no reply.

"I could not give any grounds for my

suspensions, still I remember not liking the appearance of things. In the first place the household had been broken up, and I was unable to ascertain anything relative to the attendant circumstances. Then Mr. Bernardin Hayes had gone abroad, it was said, overwhelmed with grief. I confess I never believed in the existence of much feeling in that quarter; yet what could I do? To make a stir without proof, would have been to pass myself for a madman. My very love for the departed seemed to force me into silence; and though, when in after years I met Bernardin Hayes, I was constantly on the point of asking some question respecting the friends of my youth, an undefined nervousness seemed as constantly to ward me off the subject. Now, something assures me that the hand of an overruling Providence is at work to un-

ravel the mystery. Tell me your part of the story. If am not mistaken, you also have a clue."

Edith hurriedly recapitulated the narrative which we gave in a former chapter, saying that Jane Wilmot could, if necessary, bear witness to its authenticity. In conclusion, she put into Major Lery's hand the little slip of paper which had come into her possession in so extraordinary a manner.

"Why, this is admirable!" cried the Major, his eyes sparkling with sudden animation. "This alone would be almost sufficient to establish your claims. Others are evidently on the track. There is some powerful undercurrent of which we as yet know nothing. I must see Mr. Molyneux Temple. I have frequently heard him spoken of as a clever lawyer and a thorough gentleman. Give me leave to act for

you," he added, in a softer tone. "Give me the happy privilege of doing something to prove the truth of all that I have told you. Promise that you will look upon me as a friend."

"I do that already," returned Edith, frankly, "and if it should be as you think, rest assured the adopted brother of my lost parents will need no other claim to my regard."

He pressed her hand gratefully, snatched his hat from the table, and with a quick "Good morning" to Jane, who had been waiting in a fever of impatience, hailed a Hansom cab, and sprang in hastily, calling out to the driver—

"5, Paper Buildings, Temple."



CHAPTER XX.

THE ONE AND THE MANY.

IN compliance with Edith's earnest entreaty, Mrs. Wilmot had, during her illness, given notice to her landlord that she wished to leave the shop at the expiration of the quarter. In a few weeks, feeling much stronger, she attempted to reverse her decision; but Miss Moorfield stood firm. They would be far better off in apartments. Jane could busy herself in attending to their dress, and in various other household avocations; while the teaching would bring in enough for them

both. Now that her sanguine disposition already revelled in the anticipation of her young mistress's good fortune, the old servant became gradually less averse to the plan. She even inquired, with something of anxiety in her tone, whether Edith had recollected to inform Major Lery of the proposed change.

"No, Jane ; I forgot all about it."

"And we are to move in ten days?"

"Never mind. He will probably call again before then ; and if not, I will write. He gave me his address. But, Jane, you promised to come with me this morning to see about getting some rooms. You will make a better bargain than I."

"Bless your dear heart, that is sure enough ; you would never stand out against anything they asked you."

So Mrs. Wilmot went to the West End,

and by dint of careful search, succeeded in getting two rooms in a back street, at a very moderate charge.

Edith was not mistaken in her conjecture. Within the week, Major Lery reappeared in a state of great excitement, saying that he felt certain they were on the right track ; that soon he would be able to congratulate her, “ with his whole heart, and the hearts of all Ireland, if they could only know the rights of the story ;” but that for the present she must keep herself perfectly quiet (advice which to any one of a less calm temperament, his mode of procedure would render an impossibility) ; that lawyers were proverbially and provokingly slow ; that it might be six months before the whole business was settled ; that, looking upon her as the child of his dearest and earliest friends, he felt himself thoroughly and supremely happy ; and finally, that his purse,

himself, and everything he possessed were wholly and unreservedly at her service.

His devoted affection towards those whom Edith at length began to consider as her parents, affected her to tears ; but she would not accept his offers of pecuniary assistance, and unhesitatingly determined to pursue her wonted occupation until everything was satisfactorily arranged ; a determination that not all the Major's entreaties, nor the outspoken remonstrances of Jane, could induce her to alter.

At the time appointed they went to their new home, where the Major (having obtained permission to call) looked in on them more frequently than was exactly in accordance with Edith's strict notions of propriety. Although the most intimate friend of her father, she could not be expected to regard him in the light of a relation ; and some jesting remarks of Mrs. Wilmot—

with whom he was an immense favourite—made her slightly apprehensive that he might be unconsciously transferring his former affection for the mother to the hitherto equally unconscious daughter. Her attachment to Morton was too deeply rooted, her disappointment was too recent, for her to think of such a possibility without extreme pain and a touch of self-reproach. Yet how could she avoid the danger?

She would write to Mrs. Seagraves.

A few days before this, during Miss Moorfield's absence, Major Lery had held a long conversation with the old servant, the purport of which was kept a profound secret. Edith was greatly amused by Jane's sudden accession of dignity; the busy and mysterious air which seemed to characterize her every moment; and the "All in good time, my dear young lady," by which she con-

trived to parry all inquiries on the subject. Finding it impossible to get a comprehensible answer, Miss Moorfield wisely determined to leave her to herself, especially as she rather dreaded her faithful attendant's opposition to the scheme she had in view, and was glad of anything that might tend to divert her mind from their temporary separation. When it was all settled, she endeavoured to break the news as gently as possible, and was not a little surprised to meet with a ready acquiescence.

“The very thing! Our business will get on as well again without you; and before long I hope to see those who have wronged you as poor and straitened as they wished to make you.”

“Jane! Jane! that shall never be, while I have a voice to prevent it. Whatever may be my uncle's faults, remember he is my father's own brother, and his daughter

is my cousin. Oh!" she exclaimed, as a thought struck her with the rapidity of lightning. "Can it be? The name is the same! An heiress! No wonder it sounded so familiar. If it be as my fears forebode, no power on earth shall induce me to bring even a reflected discredit on his wife."

"His wife!" repeated Mrs. Wilmot, in a bewildered tone. "Whose wife? Surely you do not mean——"

"Jane, in pity do not ask me any questions. Oh, what *can* I do? I have gone too far to retract; they will not let me give it up." She put her hand to her forehead. "Yet I may spare him the humiliation! Jane, dear, do not talk to me, please; and whatever you may think, do not mention anything to any one—the lawyers, I mean."

"Of course not, Miss Edie," replied the

old servant, slightly piqued ; “ but may I not tell the Major ? ”

“ No, no—him least of all.

It will be seen that Edith had no knowledge whatever of all that had transpired since her last meeting with Sir Frederick ; and her generous disposition was horror-struck at the idea of reaping any personal advantage at the cost of his wife. She had so long accustomed herself to look upon his marriage as an established fact, that the possibility of its non-existence never once occurred to her. The name Hayes had in a moment attracted her attention ; but the deeper interest of the Major’s story soon obliterated the impression ; and beyond the admission that Bernardin Hayes had a daughter, by some strange chance the subject had never again been mentioned. Even now her anxiety might prove to be entirely without foundation ; it might be merely a

casual resemblance, and she tried to persuade herself that it was ; but in the event of its proving the reverse her resolution was taken. She would give up everything rather than bring any unpleasantness on him.

“A letter from Edith !” exclaimed the Rector’s wife, as she entered the breakfast-room ; “full of excuses and apologies. Poor child ! I can understand it all. She would not write to us until she could do so cheerfully. And what *do* you think she says, Robert ?”

“My dear little wife, how can I tell ?”

“Why, that she would like to come back to us if we can have her. To that there is but one answer. I am so glad, and positively can afford to give up disliking Sir Frederick.”

“I should think so, after keeping your anger for six months. For shame, Nelly ! When does Edith talk of coming ?”

“She leaves it to us. I shall say at once, I am so heartily tired of playing at teaching and letting the children run wild.”

And so, about three weeks after Lord Oxenten’s return, Miss Moorfield became again an inmate of the Rectory.

Deep and heartfelt was the joy her return created. During her previous stay she had greatly endeared herself to the cottagers and the village school children; and, as her little pupils clustered around her, and their gentle-tempered mother affectionately kissed her, while, under the window, Willie Grey—in happy forgetfulness of the fact that his master and mistress were both within hearing—threw his cap into the air with a wild “Hurrah!” and the Rector looked up from his book with an amused smile, and repeated, approvingly, “Well done;” Edith felt—as under circumstances of irremediable sorrow it would

be well if all of us could feel—that there is in the aggregate of affection a charm that none but a hopelessly selfish nature can resist, and that where love fails us in the chosen one, or few, the next best thing is to transfer it to the many.





CHAPTER XXI.

WELCOME HOME !



THE month of August came and passed ; September followed, and still Lord Oxenten could neither make himself happy at the shooting-box, nor summon courage to face the gloomy solitude of his home. Yet he knew full well that he ought to return and live among his tenantry ; that there was work to be done that he alone could do, and duty to fulfil that his high station only rendered more imperative.

Mary Morton was the first to notice the shadow of anxiety on the brow of her

betrothed, and soon won from him a confession of the truth.

“I ought to be there—I know it; but my spirit has been broken by sorrow. I cannot make up my mind to go without you and my boy. May, darling, you love me; why should we not go together?”

Lord Dunorven, who was sitting on Miss Morton’s knee, and whose precocious intelligence made him frequently catch the sense of a conversation not meant for him to hear, seemed to think it necessary to give his opinion on the subject, and lisped—

“Mamie go with papa; yes, Mamie go with papa.”

“You see,” said Lord Oxenten, smiling as he drew them both within his circling arm, “Arte asks you for me. Will you refuse us?”

Mary did not reply in words; but she

raised her clear eyes to his; and he needed no other answer.

For some time Sir Frederick would not hear of it; but when he saw that his sister was unhappy, and the Earl in moving language represented the evils that would inevitably result from his prolonged absence, he relented, and promised to do his best to overrule the scruples of his mother.

They were married on a warm bright morning in the beginning of October. Only old Christian, a few of the attached retainers of the Grange, and the members of Sir Frederick's own family, were present. Immediately after the breakfast, the Earl and Countess, with Lord Dunorven, started for Oxenten Castle in an open carriage drawn by four beautiful greys—Christian, Bianca, and the other servants in charge of their luggage, immediately preceding them. Where the good of others was at

stake, they did not hesitate to depart from established custom; and as, during the homeward journey, Lord Oxenten held his wife's hand, and amused himself by teaching his child to call her "Mamma Mamie" (for Arte was obstinate, and refused to give up the name to which he had so long been accustomed), Mary felt, in the brightness and sunshine of her dawning married life, that the sorrows and sufferings of the past were not only not unrequited, but ten thousandfold repaid.

The whole village turned out to welcome them, and a deafening cheer for the Earl and Countess made the air ring again, as the four thoroughbreds, apparently unconscious of fatigue, dashed up the Park Avenue, at the end of which had been erected a triumphal arch with M and O intertwined.

Little Arte, who had fallen asleep during

the latter half of the journey, now completely awakened by the noise, stood up on his father's knee, and began to clap his hands and crow with delight, a sight which gave a new impulse to the acclamations of the tenantry.

"Three cheers for the young lord!" cried an old white-headed farmer; and again the thrilling voices of England's sturdy peasantry rose as the voice of one man in the distance, taken up by the outsiders, and repeated in one lengthened round.

"They are cheering my boy," cried the Earl, much affected. "Arte, wave your hat. See, as I do." And, as he slipped the elastic, the child, nothing loth, began to follow his example with an energy that crowned the general enthusiasm. "They are glad to see you, my darling! They are telling you so."

"Glad, glad! Arte glad too!" lisped the

little Viscount (wrought up to a pitch of excitement that would have seriously alarmed Bianca, had she been present), as the carriage swept round the curve which led to the grand entrance; while tears of restrained feeling shone in the eyes of his adopted mother, and the Earl clasped him to his heart with an inward thanksgiving, and a prayer that the blessing of Heaven might hallow the events of that soul-stirring day.





CHAPTER XXII.

MARY, COUNTESS OF OXENTEN.

THE Earl's young bride speedily won golden opinions from all classes in the neighbourhood. Her beauty and affability; her devotion to her husband; her extreme tenderness and devotion towards Lord Dunorven; her self-denying charity, which made itself felt the first week of her residence among them, were the admiration of all hearts and the theme of every tongue. With the Rector and his children she soon became a favourite. Mrs. Seagraves, perhaps influenced by her prejudice against Sir Frederick, stood out a little longer; but

after the interchange of a few visits even she grew into a convert.

And Edith? Ah, Edith was drawn towards her from the first ; hung on her words, and almost worshipped her calm, spiritualized loveliness ! How could she do otherwise ? Was not Mary, Countess of Oxenten, *his* sister ? Why should not Edith love her ? There was at least no sin in that affection !

Mr. and Mrs. Seagraves had never alluded to the relationship, out of regard to the feelings of their governess ; although, as they knew what she did not—namely, that Sir Frederick Morton was still unmarried—both may have been occasionally tempted to indulge in speculations as to the possible result of the intimacy.

Mary soon began to experience a corresponding interest in Miss Moorfield. In early years, when the matter rests on the will of an amiable fresh-hearted girl, it does

not take very long to cultivate a friendship ; indeed, when there is anything to fix upon, the plant scarcely seems to require cultivation. Before many days had elapsed, Lady Oxenten determined to abolish the distinctions of rank, insisting that they should call each other by their Christian names.

Lord Oxenten viewed their growing friendship with generous self-forgetfulness. He valued his own rank far less than others valued it, and would as soon have thought of turning the mouth of a cannon on an invited guest, as dream of questioning the position or parentage of one whom he instinctively felt to be a lady. And so the Countess visited the Rectory, and Edith glided in and out of the grand old Castle with a mutual confidence and an undisturbed reliance on each other, that might have been measured by years rather than weeks.

It sometimes appeared strange to Edith that although Lady Oxenten spoke of her brother in terms of the tenderest attachment, she never by any chance alluded to that brother's imagined wife. What could such silence portend? Were they not happy? The mystery was destined to be unexpectedly solved.

One morning Miss Moorfield went up to the Castle to help the Countess to arrange some cards that were to be distributed for a clothing club, which Lord Oxenten had recently established. Mary had evidently been crying.

"Oh, Edith, I am so glad you are come. My head aches, and I cannot do anything alone. I have just had a letter from mamma, and Frederick, my darling brother—he is so ill."

A mist swam before Edith's eyes. She struggled heroically for self-command; but

the shock was too sudden. Morton was ill—perhaps dying. (A woman's love invariably pictures the worst.) And why? Oh, why? Alas, the power of utterance was wanting. She put out her hand, seeking something to support herself, staggered, and fell back on the nearest couch, white and senseless.

Startled into forgetfulness of her own anxiety, and terrified by the deathlike appearance of her friend, Lady Oxenten stood for the moment paralysed. Just then the Earl came in. She turned to him without attempting to explain.

“Arthur, dearest; carry her to my boudoir.”

Lord Oxenten instantly complied. As he relinquished his still insensible burden, he looked inquiringly and anxiously at his wife.

“My darling, what new trouble is per-

plexing you? All this excitement, added to poor Frederlek's illness, will be too much for you, dear May. What is it all about?"

"I do not know myself, dear Arthur. Don't take any notice now. I will tell you what I think by-and-by."

Seeing it would be better not to distress her by questions, he left the room.

When Edith recovered her senses, she found the Countess sitting by her side; alternately chafing her hands and bathing her forehead with eau-de-Cologne.

Her first thought was that of overwhelming shame. To what possible cause could she attribute her sudden indisposition? How face Mary's searching glance? and if her suspicions pointed to the truth, how endeavour to excuse to another an excess of emotion which, to her own pure mind, seemed so utterly inexcusable? Oh, it was hard that physical strength

should fail, where the spirit strove so nobly !

She lifted her eyes timidly.

“ Thank you, dear Lady Oxenten ; thank you, so much ; I am better now.”

Longing to escape from that terrible scrutiny, she tried to rise, but the effort was a failure.

Gentle and sympathizing as she was by nature, Lady Oxenten would not be put off with an evasion.

“ Tell me candidly ; I have a right to ask. Edith, are you acquainted with my brother ?”

Edith’s tears flowed fast. Concealment was no longer possible. Claspings her hands as if to implore compassion, she faltered—

“ I knew him before he was married ; but we have never met since.”

“ Not met since ! What do you mean ? Sir Frederick Morton has never been mar-

ried, and he is utterly incapable of falsehood ! Do not trifle with me, Edith. You are my friend, and I will treat you as such ; but we must have no half-confidence. Again I ask you, what do you mean ?”

Not married ! Why that wild thrill of tumultuous joy ? Like the lightning’s flash, as bright as evanescent.

“Again I ask you, what do you mean ?”

The Countess spoke sternly, but she did not intend to be unkind, and her heart smote her with a touch of self-reproach the moment she had spoken.

Stung to the quick by the tone, rather than the meaning of the words, Edith got off the couch, and throwing herself on her knees, buried her face in her hands in a passion of uncontrollable weeping.

“Oh, Lady Oxenten,” she murmured, “you have taught me to love you so dearly.

What have I done that you should speak to me so harshly?"

Mary's thoughts reverted to a somewhat similar scene in her own experience, when she (even she, now Countess of Oxenten), in the hour of her heart's great agony, was fain to implore the sympathy of another, and might have had to implore it in vain. With quick tenderness she bent over the almost prostrate girl, twining her arms lovingly about her neck.

"Do not cry so, darling. Forgive me, Edith, forgive me. Come, we must not quarrel about Frederick; not now he is so ill." And her tears fell in concert.

"It was only that overcame me," repeated Edith. "I could have borne all else; but not to think that he was ill and miserable. Oh, what have I said? I had no right to think so."

"I believe your opinion may be the

correct one, Edith. Indeed, I am sure he is unhappy. But we will not talk of it now. How came you to think that he was married?"

"I heard that he was to be married last Christmas. They said he was engaged to a Miss Hayes."

"So he was then, but the engagement was broken off. And now will you not tell me some portion of your history, and why the mention of poor Frederick's illness should agitate you so strangely?"

At this appeal Edith rose from her knees, and looking earnestly at the Countess, said, with a new and touching dignity—

"Ah! Lady Oxenten, if *he*, if Sir Frederick himself has not seen fit to inform you, do you think I ought? No, the secret must go with me to my grave. God help me to bear it as I may; but never, not even to purchase the con-

tinuance of your friendship, could I be false to myself. I was so happy in the love of his sister," she added, mournfully, "and now that too I suppose must go with the rest."

The Countess was deeply affected, but would not trust herself to say anything more ; and shortly afterwards Miss Moorfield returned to the Rectory.





CHAPTER XXIII.

HEIRSHIP AND DEPENDENCE.

DIRECTLY she found herself alone, Lady Oxenten went to her husband's study. When she had told him all that had passed between herself and Edith, the Earl looked up gravely.

“It has always been my impression that Morton's illness was mental rather than physical. I think you would do very wrong to conceal this from him. Better a thousand times that he should marry a governess than that his health and happiness should be sacrificed to—forgive me, dear May—an absurd notion of hereditary pride.”

“But how are we to know that——”

“That there has been anything very serious between them? True, we cannot be sure; but the quiet dignity with which Miss Moorfield declined to give you the information that Morton had seen fit to withhold, to my mind speaks volumes.”

“But how would you advise me to act? You would not have me tell Frederick the scene of this morning?”

“Certainly not, love. It would be neither kind nor just to your friend. I should simply mention Miss Moorfield’s name in a matter-of-fact way, saying that you had found her a very pleasant acquaintance, or something to that effect. From the opinion I have formed of her character I should think it far more likely that she kept out of Morton’s way from a spirit of generous self-sacrifice, than that he had ever thought of avoiding her.”

“ Well, I shall write to him to-day, and will put in a sentence about Edith.”

“ Do so, by all means ; it can do no harm and may do good. The hand of Providence is often seen clearest in trifles. Who knows the effect it may have on Morton’s health? Happiness is invariably the best restorative.”

Lady Oxenten smiled through her tears.

“ Come, May. I shall have you ill. Go and write to him at once. I want you to drive with me as soon as you have finished your letter.”

The unexpected intelligence that Sir Frederick’s engagement had been long broken off; that, to all practical purposes, he was free as the air around her; that it was no longer sin to cherish his image in her heart, and, in secret, grieve over the reminiscences of an eventful past, threw

Edith into a state of agitation and excitement that may be better imagined than described. She did not delude herself by any fond anticipations. The barrier which, in the first instance, had been the means of their separation, as far as he knew was still in existence. Come what might her hand should never remove it, with any view to a result in her favour. No ; if he loved her still, he must seek her as he sought her before. He must woo her as the penniless dependent, or his love for the heiress would turn to wormwood and gall.

The next morning she received a letter from Major Lery, written in wild spirits, stating that everything was satisfactorily settled, and that her presence alone was needed to complete the arrangements. Bernardin Hayes had given up without a struggle ; indeed he had no chance of legally maintaining his ground. The testimony of

Margaret Nicholson and Jane Wilmot, and more important still, that of the merchant's clerk, who had been finally hunted out of his obscurity by the perseverance and acumen of a London lawyer—brought to bear a mass of evidence that combined was irresistible. Margaret Nicholson testified to the exposure of the child, specifying the hour, the date, and all other attendant circumstances; Mr. Grey, with corresponding exactitude, deposed to the finding of the said infant; while Jane Wilmot furnished the remaining proofs by establishing the identity of the foundling with the adopted daughter of the wealthy widow.

And yet Edith, on the threshold of untold prosperity, knowing full well that the news of her good fortune would be hailed with delight by the kind-hearted Rector and his wife, hesitated to communicate the tidings even to them. She instinctively

felt that to do so, under present circumstances, would snap the last link between herself and Morton. The thought of his illness repressed the exultation she might perhaps have indulged on finding herself no longer under the world's ban as "a girl without a name." The assurance of a stainless birth was to her great joy ; but the knowledge of his suffering was an infinitely greater sorrow.

On the morrow, greatly to his dissatisfaction, Major Lery received a note from Miss Moorfield, which, while it acknowledged in the most expressive terms her deep sense of gratitude towards him, stated that it was impossible for her to come to town just then ; and that she trusted to his friendship to keep everything quiet until he heard from her again.

Jane Wilmot (who, in the first instance, was retained to give evidence, and had

recently been placed in charge of Edith's town residence) was excessively irate at this unseasonable delay; but, after the edge of disappointment had worn off, consoled herself by the following not very perspicuous remark—

“Miss Edie always had a will of her own, poor lamb. When her mind is once made up, 'tis no good trying to thwart her.”


Ah, there was something of the lion as well as the lamb in the firm and gentle nature of Edith Gerard Hayes.





CHAPTER XXIV.

NIGHT AND MORNING.

 HERE was sorrow at the Grange. Its noble owner seemed to be stricken by some mysterious and unaccountable malady. For months past he had been growing gradually thinner and paler; taking less and less interest in rural sports, and spending more and more time in the solitude of his study. At length he ceased to go out, and would lie for hours on the sofa, listlessly turning over the leaves of a book which he scarcely ever read, and seeing no one but Lady Morton and the family physician.

Dr. Mayhew was evidently distressed, and one morning, when closely questioned by the anxious mother, he told her bluntly that her son was suffering in mind, and that unless some means of bringing matters to a happy issue could be speedily discovered, he would not answer for the consequences.

“But he will not die, Doctor? For God’s sake do not tell me *that!* Surely he will get stronger soon?”

“It doesn’t look much like it,” said the Doctor, grimly.

“But what can I do? what can I do? Will you speak to him?”

“My dear Lady Morton, you surely know your son sufficiently well to be aware that such a step on my part would inevitably be regarded by him as an insult!”

“But what is to be done? I cannot see him lie there and—die. Doctor, in

pity, have you no plan? Cannot you suggest something?"

"I can only give you my own impressions. No medicine will do him any good. I tell you he has something on his mind; but if his own mother cannot speak to him upon the subject, no one else should presume to interfere."

Hard words these for Lady Morton. "*Magna nominis umbra*" would not stand her in stead, as every nerve thrilled under the pressure of maternal agony and fruitless remorse. Die! Could it be that he must die? Her son, her first-born, the hope of her declining years; so good, so noble, so beloved by every one; the last of his race, and to her—ah, what was he not to her?

She dared not ask him any questions. An impenetrable wall of reserve had been gradually built up between them. He had gone beyond her lessons, and his pride on

some points was greater than her own. Death might be the penalty, but he would not own to the cause. He, a Morton, if guilty of a weakness, would never acknowledge it to his mother.

While Lady Morton was grieving over an evil that she knew not how to remedy, it so happened that one day Dr. Mayhew (who the preceding evening fancied he could detect a slight accession of fever in his patient) called at the Grange before the arrival of the morning post. While he was talking with Sir Frederick (who, notwithstanding his indifferent health, still continued to rise early), Lady Morton came into the room.

“ Frederick, dear, here is a letter from Mary. Just see if——”

Before finishing the sentence she was called away.

“ Excuse me a moment, Doctor.”

The Baronet broke the seal, and for some seconds read on unmoved ; then, with a start which perfectly electrified his companion, he sprang from the couch, exclaiming—" I must go to her at once."

His resolution of instantly setting out somewhere, which appeared to signify an intention of paying a visit to Oxenten Castle, a distance of at least thirty miles, rather staggered the physician.

"Mayhew, you dear old fellow, do not look so scared. I shall get well now without any of your medicine! Where is my mother?"

At that moment Lady Morton returned, and was not a little astonished to see her son standing erect in the middle of the room, with a countenance from which every trace of depression appeared to have been swept away as if by the hand of enchantment.

“Mother, I am going down to Oxenten. Let them put the horses to at once, and tell Hawley I shall want my portmanteau.”

Lady Morton gazed at him as though in serious doubt of his sanity.

“But, Frederick—Dr. Mayhew——”

Her anxiety was unheeded by the Baronet. Saying, in a very decided tone, “I cannot stay to talk to you now, as I have to dress,” he went upstairs, leaving his mother and the Doctor to condole with each other.

“Let me beg of you, my dear Lady Morton, to take no notice of this fancy; and above all things do not worry him with questions. He is all right. I am sure of it. The journey will not hurt him in the least—quite the contrary. I told you his illness was more that of the mind than the body; and I think we may now look for an elucidation of the puzzle.”

Sir Frederick started at eleven, and a

little before three arrived within sight of the village of Oxenten, having only stopped once on the road. The horses did their work gallantly, but their pace seemed slow to his impatience, and for the first time in his life he felt tempted to be cruel. Unwilling to excite remark, he got out a few yards from the Rectory grounds, and giving his coachman orders to wait for him in the Park Avenue, went up the well-remembered walk. As he was about to enter the garden, Willie Grey (who always managed to turn up when least expected) ran forward to open the gate; and touching his cap, said, with an odd mixture of delight and perplexity—

“Miss Moorfield’s back, sir.”

“Yes, boy, I know.” (Sir Frederick was in extreme good humour, or he might have been annoyed at thus having his errand as it were “divined.”) “Are your master and mistress at home?”

Willie felt greatly relieved, and altered his tone.

"No, sir, they be all out 'cept the gov'ness, and she's stayin' at home to see arter the Clothing Club."

"The governess!" thought Sir Frederick. His beautiful Edith—they should speak of her under another title before long. He rang the bell impatiently.

Willie Grey stood watching him with some suspicion, and fast recurring apprehensions. "What did he want? And what business had he to come? Nobody wanted *him*!"

"Can I see Miss Moorfield?"

Luckily it was a strange servant.

"I believe so, sir. I think she is in. What name shall I say, please?"

"Say that a gentleman wishes to speak to her."

Thinking it must be one of the sub-

scribers to the club, Miss Moorfield unhesitatingly entered the drawing-room. She was very quiet and sad, and her black silk dress tended rather to heighten the effect. Yet, robed in the mystic colouring of affection, to him who awaited her how infinitely lovely! The sudden joy was too much. He could scarcely breathe.

There was a start of almost terror ; a momentary pause of irrepressible agitation ; a wild longing look into each other's countenance, as if to read there the heart's deep history — and Edith is strained passionately to her lover's breast.

It was long before either could speak, and then there was not a word of explanation. Why should they need it? Tears, kisses, the eloquent, exhaustless language of affection, the blissful consciousness of each other's presence, were to them a delirium of happiness. It seemed as if those lips

would never quit their hold, nor that fond clasp loosen.

“At last, Edith! My own! Mine only! through life until death—never again to be taken from me by the cold, cruel hand of circumstance!”

Should she tell him? No, not yet.

“But oh, Frederick, your mother! What will she—what will your sister think of your wedding one in my friendless position?”

“Nay, Edith, while I live my chosen bride can never be friendless, be she born as she may. We have been proud, sweet one; but it is over now. The last year we have all suffered very keenly. I with others and they with me. It has done us good—taught us to think more wisely, more kindly, more correctly of things as they are. My mother will receive you with open arms as the restorer of her son’s health, the sum and substance of his earthly happi-

ness. And Mary! Ah, Mary loves you for your own sake, and will she not love you for mine? Ay, love and bless you for the new life you have given me. Do you know, Edith," he continued, looking into her eyes with searching tenderness, "if I had not seen you very soon I should have died!"

And then Edith saw (what in her agitation she had at first failed to observe) how changed he was; how pale and thin, how utterly unlike himself, save in the well-remembered outline and the kind, warm smile. Although she knew he had been ill, she was unprepared for so great an alteration; and, after vainly attempting to speak, burst into tears.

"What, grieving over your own handiwork!" said the Baronet, playfully, striving to soothe her by caresses. "Nay, then, naughty girl, you shall speedily undo it. I

shall come and carry you off to a quiet little church, and fetter you at once, so as to put it out of your power to inflict any farther injury. Then, when I take my beautiful bride to my old ancestral home; when I wear the priceless pearl that I have sought so long and carefully, and hitherto in vain; when I wear that pearl in triumph, no one, not even the boldest, will dare to question where I found it. Come, Edith, I will not have you cry. Do you know," he continued, again taking possession of the tear-stained face, "I feel strongly tempted to lock you up in some secure place, until I can get a licence to claim you as my own. How am I to be sure that in coming here to-morrow, I shall not find that you have been spirited away in some unaccountable fashion, or be told at the gate that no such person as Miss Moorfield has been heard of?"

What more might have passed between them was cut short by the entrance of the Rector, who, startled out of his usual gentleman-like composure, exclaimed, in a tone of indescribable bewilderment—

“Eh—what? Bless me! Why, Sir Frederick Morton. I beg your pardon, but—but—what does it all mean?”

“It means, my dear sir, that I am come to claim my bride, and shall expect you and Mrs. Seagraves to assist at the wedding.”

Edith escaped.





CHAPTER XXV.

FOR EVER.



ELL, Morton, you certainly do not look as ill as I expected to see you," said the Earl, meeting him on the threshold, without, however, manifesting the least symptom of surprise.

The reply to this was a half-conscious laugh and a merciless grasp of the hand.

"Where is my sister?"

"Stay, don't frighten her. Your movements are so sudden that you are scarcely fit to be trusted. I will go and prepare her."

The necessity was obviated by the little Viscount, who, crossing the hall with his Italian foster-mother, rushed to Sir Frederick with a cry of delight—"Mor, Mor, dear Mor!"—while Bianca, anxious to be the first to communicate good tidings, ran upstairs to Lady Oxenten. The next moment Mary was in her brother's arms. His whispered, "You have saved me, May," told her all that she wanted to know; and again, in responsive affection, as on a former, though widely different occasion, she murmured—

"My darling Fred; I am so glad, so very glad."

Ere long the whole story was laid before her, with the sole exception of Edith's supposed birth, which the Baronet determined to keep to himself. Lord Oxenten, who probably looked forward with additional

pleasure to hearing it repeated to him by his wife, good-naturedly left them alone.

On his return he called the Countess aside.

“May, we must not forget that Morton is very far from well, though he certainly looks uncommonly happy. Suppose you ask Miss Moorfield to spend a week with us here? It will be much better for him than going backwards and forwards to the Rectory; and you may be quite sure that her society will do more to re-establish his health than all your nursing.”

The Earl’s eyes wandered with an amused expression to a corner of the room, where, leaning back in a large easy-chair, the Baronet sat, gazing into vacancy (or perhaps we ought to say, into the dream-world of affection), an unconscious smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

“Dear Arthur, how good you are. I will write to her at once.”

The next morning Sir Frederick was informed of their plans for his gratification, to be carried out solely on condition that he would remain quietly at the Castle, and allow his sister to go down and fetch Edith, so as to meet her alone ; Mary's innate refinement suggesting that such a course would be most agreeable to her friend.

Immediately after her interview with Morton, Miss Hayes made known to the Rector and his wife the good fortune that had recently befallen her, as well as the fact of her engagement ; so that when Lady Oxenten made her appearance at the Rectory, it was easy to imagine the purport of her visit.

Covered with blushes, trembling, she scarcely knew why ; longing, yet afraid to enter, Edith stood before the drawing-room door. At length she compelled herself to make the necessary effort.

In an instant the vague apprehensions that had haunted her died out in the sunshine of happiness; in an instant the arm of the Countess was around her, her warm kiss on her cheek; and words of the tenderest welcome sanctified and sealed the embrace.

“My sister, my sweet sister!”

And this to the portionless dependent.

The heart of the heiress throbbed wildly, but she would not undeceive her. Not yet, not yet. The reaction was too over-powering, the reality too blissful.

The following day, between five and six in the afternoon, Sir Frederick and his betrothed were together in the library at Oxenten. Edith had risen, intending to go upstairs to dress; but the Baronet held both her hands. He was ardently pleading his own cause.

“You are too honest to make dress the

excuse. That is not the reason, I am sure. I will not be needlessly tortured. Why should I not have my own way a little?"

Edith stole one half-shy, half-mischievous glance, which seemed to say she thought he would have it a great deal.

"Oh, let it be soon. Preparations are nothing. Darling, come to me now—now!"

He released her hands, and locked his arms round her, looking down with proud triumph on the lovely flushed countenance that was lying on his breast.

"I cannot live without you! Come to me now!"

Half entreaty, half command, Edith no longer attempted to frame an excuse for delay, conquered less by his arguments than by the secret yearning of her own woman-heart. His presence was a temporary heaven. Why should she stand outside the gates of her happiness?

The Baronet felt that she had yielded the point (although on such occasions women never express themselves in so many words); but he had evidently no thought of allowing her to depart. Lord Oxenten was with his steward, Mary with the little Viscount; there was no one to interrupt them. Edith was his—his own—his only. He should keep her there as long as he chose!

It was nearly dark, but the reflection of the firelight marked that side of the room by a cheerful contrast, falling full on the features of Sir Frederick and his chosen; her face turned towards the ruddy glow, he bending over her, unconsciously catching every shade of expression—the same thoughts deep in each other's heart, like the works of a clock, writing themselves on the outward index.

There was a protracted silence. At length

the door opened noiselessly, and some one entered.

The intruder stood gazing on the scene before her with a mixture of astonishment and delight. To her in the darkness, the lovers in the brightness of their mutual felicity, surrounded by the red glow of the firelight, with the polished oak panelling for a background, seemed like the outline of a glorious old picture. It was Lady Morton, who, on receipt of a note from Mary, resolved to answer it in person.

For a moment she was spell-bound, then advanced towards them with a longing, half-uttered cry—

“My son, my son!”

The heiress started violently. It was the last trial. Sir Frederick drew her forward without loosening his hold. She had no distinct recollection of what followed. “My mother!” “My dear child!”

The warm embrace extended — oh, was it not a dream?—extended even to her!

She did not feel certain of anything until late that evening, when again for a short period alone with the Baronet, assured beyond her fondest hopes of the tenderest welcome from his family, the barrier of reserve broke down, and she told him her true history.


They were married very quietly at Oxenten Church, in the presence of a select circle of Sir Frederick's intimate friends. It was an interesting sight, but as all weddings are proverbially very much alike, we will not attempt to give a description.

We leave them in their happiness, standing side by side, pledged to each other once and for ever, through Life until Death.



CHAPTER XXVI.

FINIS.

UR story is at an end. It only remains for us to dispose of the subordinate characters in such a manner as may satisfy the reader's curiosity.

The Dowager Lady Morton, to whom her son's marriage was the acme of felicity, and who speedily formed a warm attachment to her daughter-in-law, divided her time between Oxenten Castle and the Grange.

Edith's first care was to make suitable provision for the humble friends who had been kind to her in the days of adversity.

She settled a handsome annuity on Mrs. Wilmot, and another on the merchant's clerk; while Sir Frederick, anxious in all things to gratify his beautiful bride, presented each with a cottage and garden on the Donnington estate.

Willie Grey was placed under the care of the head-gardener, and sent every day to the village school—where Lady Morton herself was able to inspect his progress—preparatory to his being taught some useful trade.

Captain Lenham and Molyneux Temple attained high honour in their several professions.

Christian Andersen continued to reside at the Castle, the favourite companion of the little Lord Dunorven and the trusted household friend of the Earl and Countess.

Mrs. Seagraves finally succeeded in conquering her prejudice against Sir Frederick.

Morton; and after her first visit to the Grange, invariably spoke of him with the greatest respect.

Poor Walter Ealing died about a week after his interview with the Earl, surrounded to the last by the most touching proofs of his foster-brother's interest. He lies by the side of his lost love.

Major Lery is a bachelor. His happiest hours are still spent in the society of the heiress, whom he persists in regarding as his niece and adopted daughter.

After some hesitation, Mrs. Lawrence was induced to sanction her son's marriage with Minnie Brooks; and when, a few months later, the young clergyman managed to exchange his living for one in a more salubrious situation, they all went to reside there together.

Monsieur de St. Pol spent the greater part of his time in foreign travel.

Bernardin Hayes and his daughter continued to live much in the old style, though neither ever reappeared in English society. Will their fate be judged too lenient if we leave them singly to the chastisement of conscience? To outward seeming the wrong-doer is seldom adequately punished in this world; but if we could look within, we might perhaps deem the balance even.

When Margaret Nicholson's task of vengeance was accomplished, she retired from the scene, without asking, or appearing to desire, any reward for the information she had given.

One other incident deserves a passing notice.

Bernardin Hayes and his daughter were chiefly remarkable for their frequent change of residence, and for the reckless manner in which both threw themselves into the amusements of the different European

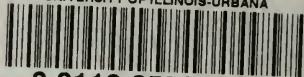
capitals. But wherever they were, at whatever distance of time or place, tracking their movements with the unerring instinct of a bloodhound, a little old woman in black was sure to follow; and whether Bernardin was on his way to the gambling-house, or conducting the still beautiful Countess to a ball, sooner or later his glance would rest on that detested form. And then — Margaret Nicholson would smile with exultation, that another poisoned arrow from her quiver had reached the heart of her enemy. Like the wandering Jew, he found no place of repose. We know not whether he ever sought it by repentance.

THE END.

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